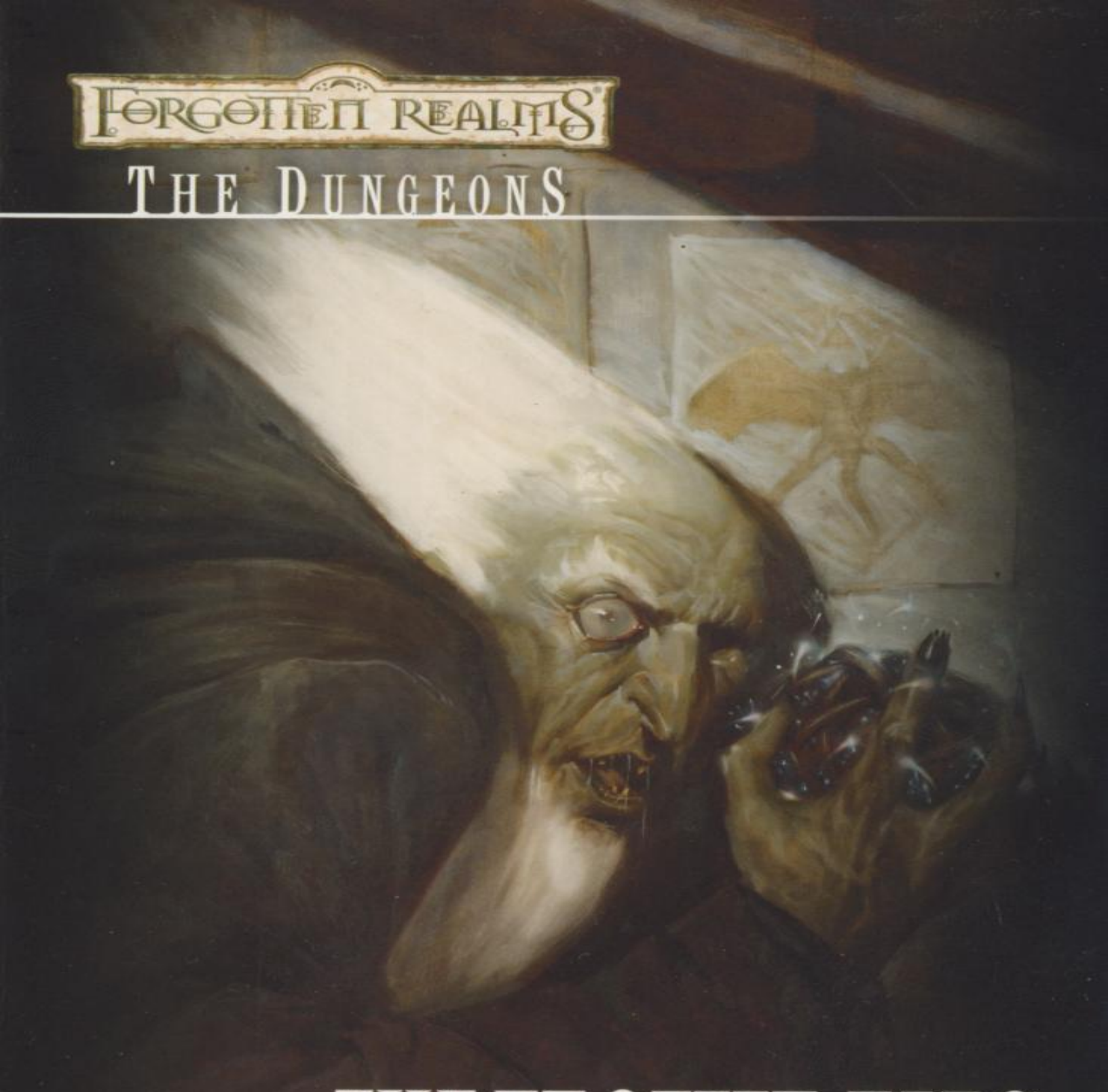
FORGOTTEN REALMS®

THE DUNGEONS



THE HOWLING DELVE

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The Dungeons 02 - The Howling Delve

By

CHAPTER 1

Esmeltaran, Amn 12 Eleasias, the Year of the Sword (1365 DR)

Kail swung the staff high, angling it at his best friend's head. Kali's fourteen-year-old limbs were all bone and wire, but the sapling was light and made a whistling sound as it cut the air above the waters of Lake Esmel.

Aazen ducked, crouched, and sprang to an adjacent rock, losing only briefly the rhythm of the violin he had tucked under his chin. The feint at his head didn't seem to faze the boy or affect his balance in the slightest.

Undeterred, Kail matched his friend's path stone for stone, taking them farther from the shore. The water turned deep blue, marking the shelf where the bottom dropped away.

"Too light," Aazen commented as the music-wire screeching, to Kail's ears-died away. He pointed to the staff. "Needs proper balance."

Kali rattled the makeshift weapon, watching its ends bounce. "It doesn't need a 'proper' anything-it's a stick."

"Heavier would give you more control." Aazen picked up a livelier tune now that he no longer had to fend off attacks.

"If I'd chosen a stouter branch, I might have hurt you," Kail pointed out, snickering. "Or broken that pretty stick of yours."

This time Aazen's music did falter under an inelegant snort. "My thanks, but I'm secure where I am."

"Oh? And you with no more rocks to flit to?" Kail asked innocently.

Still playing, Aazen turned, and Kail swung as he did so, this time aiming for the ankles with a broom-sweep that would send his friend into the water.

The staff whistled through empty air as Aazen jumped, tucked his legs into his stomach, and-damned if he didn't make it look simple-landed gracefully on the same rock he had just been standing on. He flashed a rare grin at Kali and finished the tune with an enthusiastic flourish.

"Well played," Kail was forced to admit. He regarded his friend while the flames of Highsun beat down on their necks. Aazen stared back. Both contemplated another round of the game.

The steady trickle of sweat running down Kail's back decided him. He stripped off his tunic and the padded atmor his father insisted he wear outside the Morel estate. The staff he laid carefully across the rock, and saw Aazen doing the same with his instrument as he too stripped down, then they both plunged into the calm waters.

"How much time, do you think?" Aazen asked when he resurfaced.

"Before they miss us?" Kali glanced at the sun. "Enough to get back, I think. If I'm wrong..." Concern flooded his smooth features. "Maybe we ought to go. This was my idea. I don't want there to be trouble for you."

The boys exchanged glances. "Trouble" bore a very different meaning for Aazen where their fathers were concerned. Kali could see the scars on his friend's bare back, though neither ever spoke of where they came from.

"You promised me a swim," said Aazen, shrugging off Kail's concern. "That's the only reason I let you drag me out here."

"Hah. I didn't hear you arguing very loud." Kali leaned over to splash his friend and saw movement on the beach.

Kail looked over Aazen's shoulder, squinting. Standing along the shoreline, like dark diamonds against the sun, was a line of men. He recognized them immediately. They were his father's guard, nothing less than his personal retinue. The boys' afternoon of play was over. Guiltily, Kail raised a hand to call them.

A loud whistle cut the air, beating sharply against Kail's eardrums. He never saw the missile's flight, but he heard its impact. The arrowhead and a bit of shaft were just visible through a muscle in Aazen's shoulder.

Dencer's arrow, Kail realized, shocked. He and Aazen had watched and occasionally helped the man fashion the arrowheads into that signature, barbed

shape. At the time, Dencer had explained how painful a wound such tips would make, and warned them never to use the weapons for hunting, for it was cruel to cause an animal undue pain.

The cry that burst from Aazen was certainly animal-like, and the impact of the arrow drove him back into Kail's chest.

Footsteps stirred Dhairr Morel from the drawings in front of him.

Three small, open arches behind his desk overlooked the central garden of his Esmeltaran estate. Visitors approaching his private office had to pass through the garden on stone walkways or wade among dense ferns and orange trees. He made sure he could always hear them coming. While dust gathered on a sketch of a peridot and opal ring, Dhairr listened, hearing every subtle alteration in the rhythm of that outside world.

"Balram," he said as the man entered the office without knocking. "Well?"

"The house remains secure, my lord," Balram Kortrun replied.

"I am always assured of that, Captain. Was that the task I set for you?" "No, my lord."

Dhairr smiled faintly. "Then let us come to the point." "My sources tell me someone plots your death," said Balram.

Dhairr eased back in his chair at the blunt pronouncement, but he was not, in truth, surprised.

The surge in his blood came from excitement, not fear. He had always known they would try again.

His hand strayed involuntarily to his throat, where a cordlike ridge of flesh had healed the slash the assassin had given him. Like the carved ivory reliefs adorning the walls of his office, his body told the story of how close he'd come to death.

He looked his captain in the eyes. "Who?"

That was the question that haunted him. His assailants had been faceless walking shadows. To kill them, he'd been forced to sit patiently, awaiting their next strike. Dhairr had waited almost twelve years for this day, but he had not idled in that time. He was well prepared.

He repeated his question, slow and deliberate. "Who comes for me?"

Balram hesitated. "We do not know, my friend," he said, but hastened to add, "Your men stand with you. They surround the house and await any call for aid. No one who enters this house will escape masked… or alive."

"They are well trained. I have no doubt. Thank you, Korttun," Dhairr said. A new thought struck him. "What of Kail?"

Balram shifted, and Dhairr's eyes narrowed. "We believe he and my son are outside the estate, my lord."

Dhairr thrust himself to his feet, his chair scraping stone, but Balram locked a restraining hand on his

friend's arm. He ignored the blazing look in the lord's eyes. "Do not. I have sent whatever men could be spared to retrieve them, but if the attack comes soon, the lake and environs are the safest places."

Dhairr jerked his arm free and turned away, a clear sign Balram would win the argument. He seldom lost. "However it ends, you will see to him?" Dhairr asked.

"Yes. As you will see to Aazen, if the reverse is true," said Balram.

Dhairr nodded and sank back into his chair, staring at nothing. "Kali has always been defiant-like his mother. There are days… nights more than morns," he said, and paused. Another memory flitted before his eyes, but the scars this time were invisible specters. "I should not have sent her away."

"Alytia was a wizard," Balram said flatly.

Dhaitr chuckled. His friend-the whole of Amn-predictably reviled the Art. His mirth quickly died. "You have also raised a motherless child. Was it so simple for you, Captain?"

Balram's lips tightened. "My son has never wanted for anything, my lord, and neither has yours." The remark held an edge of bitterness that Dhairr failed to notice. "By removing your wife, you have taken all magic, and the danger that inherently follows such power, from your house and from your son's eyes. Is that not worth whatever deprivation he may have suffered?"

"Yes," Dhairr said, but the familiar conviction did not come. Perhaps it was because he again faced his own mortality.

When he had first known her, nothing about Alytia seemed to matter-not her magic, her defiance, or even her association with the great meddlers of Faerun. He'd hardly cared about anything save her beauty, her breath feathering his chest in the night, and the child they conceived after a year of such blissful ignorance.

While his son lay wailing in his crib, assassins laid open Dhairr's throat and left him bleeding on the floor of his bedchamber. He'd survived, but his eyes had been brutally opened.

He never learned the identities of the assassins, never knew for certain whether it was hatred of his wife's magic or her dangerous alliances that drove them, but he had taken no chances.

"Leave one alive," Dhairr said, turning his attention back to Balram, "to question."

"I will tell Meraik-"

"No." Dhairt cut him off. "I'll tell them myself. I'm going down."

"Is that wise?"

The lord of Morel house smiled grimly, but his face possessed a gray tinge, a wasted look enhanced by the scar at his throat. "I tire of waiting."

Balram half-bowed as Dhairr swept from the room. He watched through the windows as his lord crossed the garden, heading for the broad arcade that fringed the outer wall.

Stationed along the courtyard and beyond were the house guards, most handpicked and trained by Balram. They nodded respectfully as their lord passed.

The guard captain raised an open palm, surprised at the sweat he felt beneath his leather glove. The slight tremble to his fingers was even more distressing, but he dismissed it as heightened awareness, anticipation of the battle to come.

"You make for a fascinating study.-Kortrun. Were you not, I believe I would have abandoned you and your little project long ago."

Balram did not turn at the voice. Soril Angildaen-Daen to those who knew him as a killer-would remain in his presence as long as Daen saw fit, whether Balram acknowledged the man or not.

"Lord Morel prefers soft wine to stronger drink, as the latter leaves his senses dull," Daen continued, unaffected by his companion's silence. He strolled into the room, his fur-capped boots making no sound as he moved to stand next to Balram. "Chessenta's finest fruit-white, as I recall you saying. I believe he keeps several bottles locked beneath an insultingly simple false bottom in this chest." He tapped the box sitting behind Morel's desk with his heel. "You might have shared a bottle, just now."

"We might have," Balram agreed, "and have, many times in the past."

"A noteworthy indication of friendship from Lord Morel, a man who, for the whole of twelve years, has demanded his food tasted for him, and scouts every door for a dagger point. Yet he drinks, uncaring, with you." "He trusts me."

"Without question. Enlighten me, then; why is your esteemed lord and friend not dead?"

"He will be, very soon," Balram assured him.

Daen crossed his arms over a barrel stomach. Balram had no idea how the rogue managed to move so silently while lugging such a gut. He wore a yards-long, gray silk vest tucked snugly into a sash of the same color embroidered in silver threads. His shirt lay open at the neck, exposing pale hairs and a square-cut onyx gem clasped in a silver claw. Balram often wondered if the necklace didn't contain some form of magic. Unlike the rest of Amn, the Shadow Thieves were not known to shy from employing wizards.

"You could have slain him painlessly just then-a quick poison, a mark of mercy. Easier still, you could leave him alive- take his men and join us now, your conscience unfettered by the murder of a friend. Yet you plan this assassination in the same bloody mannet as almost caused your friend's downfall twelve years ago. I applaud the irony and your enthusiasm, of course, but you risk much."

With much to gain, thought Balram. Like Morel, he had used his years wisely. "The men I have trained,

the men who, if this attempt succeeds, will be assets to your organization," he added pointedly, "have not been tested."

"Ah, unfortunate," Daen agreed. "Men loyal to Balram but not yet weaned from Morel's purse. You have no idea if they will actually be able to betray the man who feeds and shelters them. Which brings up a point close to my heart," he added, as if the thought had only just occurred to him, "and those of my colleagues. How will you be able to survive without Motel's considerable income, should you succeed? The gem road connects his doorstep to Keczulla, and his fortunes look only to increase with the growth of that city. Forgive me, but financially, the jewel-lord of Esmeltaran is a more favorable prospect for the Shadow Thieves than the mercenary, Balram Kortrun."

"I have served Morel a decade this winter. I am not without assets."

"Oh, splendid," Daen chortled. "You have been hoarding the pearls, so to speak. No doubt Morel was willing to pay his guard captain a satisfactory price to keep his family and fortune safe from assassins."

A larger price than Daen would ever conceive, Balram agreed silently. Twelve years of looking over his shoulder had wrought more taints in Dhairr than just paranoia, but that condition had helped Balram's cause the most. Morel had been more than willing to offer his captain the coin and latitude to do as he desired.

More than willing to open his home to a coinless mercenary and his starving son.

The trembling sensation returned to his hands. Balram fisted one on the naked blade of his sword until he felt flesh give. Like the severing of a wire, the tension inside him eased.

You have outgrown Lord Morel, he reminded himself. The Shadow Thieves could offer him more than a life of setvitude. They would take him and Aazen into their protection, allowing Balram to expand on the foundation he'd built. In quieter days, he would allow himself to regret killing Morel and his son, even to grieve for them-but not now. Now, he could afford no feeling, no compassion, for the Shadow Thieves- despite Daen's jovial bluster- permitted neither.

If the plan failed… no, it would not, not as long as secrecy prevailed. He had warned Dhairr to avoid drawing suspicion, but even on his guard, Morel could not stand against so many. His men would use all caution.

From the window, he had a clear view of the west tower of the estate, its aviary alive with the cries of hawks and other raptors. A guard stepped into view at one of the arched openings. Balram raised a hand.

The guard caught the gesture and slipped into the shadows of the tower. A breath passed, and the bird cries intensified. When the guard re-emerged, his sword lay bare in his hand, and his face was covered by a dark hood that obscured all but his eyes. In his

other hand, he held a flaming scrap of cloth stuffed into a green glass bottle.

Without hesitating, the guard threw the concoction of fire down into the central courtyard, where it smashed against a lattice of wood and climbing roses.

Shouts and smoke immediately filled the courtyard. Balram stepped away from the window. He slid his uninjured hand inside a carefully sewn pocket at the breast of his tunic. His fingers closed around a hard, circular object that seemed to pulse under leather and flesh.

All caution. He repeated the mantta. And if that wasn't enough, well, Daen wasn't the only one who possessed magic.

CHAPTER 2

Esmeltaran, Amn 12 Eliasias, the Year of the Sword (1365 DR)

Kail couldn't think. He looked desperately to the shore, at Dencer nocking another arrow to his longbow. The other figures were on the move, covering their faces with some sort of hood, fading back into the trees in the ditection of his father's estate. Kail could see the tips of its two domed towets in the distance.

Morel house was being attacked from within. His mind fumbled over the realization. Did his father know of the treachery? Was he still alive? The last thought sent a tremor through Kail's body. If Aazen hadn't been there to grab him, Kail would have lurched up onto the rock, running right into death to get back to the house.

"Kali," Aazen croaked, snapping the boy's attention back to the shore. Dencer stood, aiming, but something was wrong. He was taking too long, holding the shot. "W-what's he waiting for?"

Aazen's teeth chattered despite the warmth of the day. Kail held him up, treading water for both of them. "I don't know," he said.

Suddenly, the air whistled again. Kail braced, but the expected killing blow never came. Instead, Dencer fell to his knees, cradling his right hip.

A horse thundered up the strand of beach, kicking sand up against black flanks. Its rider tossed aside an empty crossbow and drew a short blade as he came.

Dencer had crawled to his feet by the time the rider reached him. Kail could finally make out the man's face. He was one of Kail's personal guardsmen, assigned by his father. "Haig!" he cried.

The rider ignored Kail's shout and swung down from the still-moving mount, swotd leading. Dencer hastily blocked with his bow, the only weapon he could bring to hand in time. The swotd bit deeply into the wood, cleaving it nearly in two.

Dencer pushed back and thrust the older man off. Haig's attack came in a bull rush, clumsy and imprecise, as if he hoped to finish his opponent off quickly and move on. Dencer dodged a second thrust, at the same time groping with the bolt that had penetrated his armor. His hand fell slack, and he swooned.

Haig pressed the advantage, driving in close for a quick kill, and played right into Dencer's feint. Dencer dropped heavily to the sand on his good side, swept one leg behind and in front of Haig's knees and twisted. The older man bent sideways and hit the ground. In the same breath Dencer sprang to his feet, running full out for the trees.

Haig cursed loudly but did not follow. He sheathed his sword and ran for the water, picking a path across the rocks.

"Haig," Kail cried again when he reached them. "Morel- the house is-"

"Besieged, aye," the man said curtly, hoisting Aazen up in his arms. "Stay behind me." His eyes were on the tree line as they picked their way back to the shore.

"Where is Father?" His heart pounding, Kail knelt on Aazen's other side as Haig laid him out on the beach. "Does he live?"

"He did, when I left him to come for you." Haig caught Kail by the arm and guided him to the arrow still planted in Aazen's shoulder. The man's hands were square and brown. Traces of gray beard lined his cheeks and chin, yet for his age he was easily twice the width of Kali, with muscle as firm as the gauntlets encasing his wrists. He shrugged off a sand-stained cloak and spread it over Aazen.

"Remove the fletchings," he instructed Kali. "Be quick, but do not aggravate the wound."

Kail did as he was told,' snapping the feathery ends off an arrow he might well have helped build. The thought jarred him, and his hands trembled.

Aazen was white to the lips. He hadn't spoken. He would be thinking of his own father, Kail realized. An attack on the house would put Balram in the heart of the battle. "What of Captain Kortrun?" he asked. "Does he-"

"Mind your work!" Haig snapped.

Kali flinched and fell silent. He threw aside the fletchings and waited while Haig helped Aazen to a half-sitting position.

Haig looked the boy in the eyes. "This will hurt."

Aazen nodded, his expression resigned. "Take it-"

Before he'd finished speaking, Haig drove his arm forward. From Kail's angle, it looked as if he were trying to wrench Aazen's arm out of its socket, but the sound was nothing like that.

Cold sweat broke out on Kail's arms. He felt like retching. Aazen's body convulsed, but he stayed eerily silent as Haig tossed the bloody arrow aside, unstoppered a vial of milky liquid, and poured it down the boy's throat. His head lolling, Aazen slid into unconsciousness. A trickle of white slid down his chin.

"He'll live," Haig said grimly, putting the empty vial back in his pouch. "He's endured worse."

"What did you give him?" Kali wanted to know, but Haig had already pulled Kail to his feet, and was dragging him to the black horse.

"A healing potion." He mounted and reached down a hand for Kali.

"We can't leave him!"

Haig made an impatient sound in his throat. He hooked a hand under Kail's armpit and hauled him bodily onto the back of the horse.

"Young Kortrun will be safer than either of us," he said. "Now, if you would care to aid your father and fight for what remains of your house, we will ride swiftly and with no talk at all. If you fall off, I will not stop for you." He looked back at Kail. "Do you understand?"

Wordlessly, Kali nodded. Haig had never reproached him like this before. He'd never spoken to him at this length in all of Kail's life, though the old man had been a permanent fixture in Kail's memories since he could walk. The common jest, whispered among the guards, was that Haig preferred the company of his horse to that of people and needed no woman to warm his bed. But the subdued old man who'd shadowed his steps on the streets of Esmeltaran was not the same person who sat before him now. Where had the strength and the steel in his eyes come from?

Those eyes raked him from head to foot, noting, Kail thought, his lack of armor. He'd left the pads on the rocks of Lake Esmel with Aazen's violin. Haig reached down and freed a curved shield from where he'd hooked it to the saddle horn.

"Here," he said, thrusting the shield at Kali. "Protect yourself when we get close to the grounds." He shook his head as he gazed at Kail. "Tymora's miracle Dencer was confused. In your smallclothes, with your hair wetted down, you both look just alike."

Kail would have asked what he meant, but Haig dug his heels into hoiseflesh, and they wete away.

CHAPTER 3

Esmeltaran, Amn, 12 Eleasias, the

Year of the Sword (1365 DR)

The grounds were deserted. Haig's boots crunched gravel as the big man dismounted in the outer yard. He pushed Kail between himself and the horse. They moved in a line right up to the entry hall. The doors were wide open, and Kali could hear fighting within. Morel's servants-guards who had not turned traitor, even members of the household staff-fought with men in hoods. Kail had counted five such on the beach, including Dencer, and there were more inside without sand on their boots.

"Whatever happens, stay at my shoulder where I can see you." Haig spoke rapidly, reaching for the short sword affixed to his saddle. "I don't know how skilled you are with a blade, but if you get the chance to stick this in something, don't hesitate, do you hear?" When Kail nodded, he went on, "We're badly outnumbered, so remember, this house is no longer your home. It's theit ground until we drive them out. Anything is a weapon to that end." He handed Kali the short sword and took a second, broader blade from a sheath. Large emeralds adorned the hilts, marks given to all the blades of Morel, from the lowliest rusted dirk to Balram's elegant long sword-a mark of Morel's success in gems and fine ornaments.

Kail's father scoffed at Amnians who draped their wealth over themselves with no context. Dhairr's gesture to even his lowest-ranking servants had

clear meaning: Morel had the means to protect his own.

But he had never planned for an attack from within, an attack that amounted to a betrayal by family. How many of the men in hoods bore emerald weapons? How many would Kail know personally if unmasked?

His chance to find out came when they entered the main hall. Two of the hooded foes darted in from side rooms, as if they'd seen them coming. Haig put himself in front of Kali and ran at both, grabbing up a large Calishite vase from a side table. He smashed the expensive item in the face of the hood to his right while simultaneously batting a raised sword out of his way. Dazed, the attacker fell back, unresisting, allowing Haig to charge forward to engage the foe to his left.

Kali stated at the scene, retaining only the presence of mind to raise his weapon while he watched the old man fight.

Screams filled the air as Gertie, one of the maids, hurtled from the hallway into the ctystal display front as if she'd been thrown. Fragile glass panes shattered under her weight. Her hands and arms were bloody when she picked herself up, but she kept running, bolting across the hall. Her usually meticulously combed curls hung loose and wild from her bonnet. A gloved hand snagged her hair, jerking the maid's head back into the doorway to the kitchens.

Kail watched in numb horror as the hand drew a knife in a crooked, horizontal slash across Gertie's throat. For a breath, the young maid's eyes met Kail's across the room. Then she saw the blood pouring down her dress and raised her hands as if she could stop the flow.

Kali charged forward, away from the safety of Haig's back. Instead of engaging the man with the knife, he ran a wide circle. Before the man could realize what he intended, Kail had wedged his sword between the wall and the display front and pulled, levering the heavy glass case away from the wall. Piles of crystal, wood, and glass came down on the hooded man, knocking him back into the kitchen. The last Kali saw of the man was the Morel emerald glinting in his knife, alongside a ruby in a nest of gold loops.

Kail dropped to his knees next to Gertie, but the maid was already dead. Above her ruined throat, her eyes stared vacantly at the ceiling. Kali felt bile rise in his throat, but a glint of gold in the blood pool caught his eye: Gertie's necklace, a small medallion emblazoned with Lathander's sunrise. The assassin's knife had cut it away. Kali scooped it up.

He caught black movement out of the corner of his eye and spun, sending his sword out in a wide, reckless arc. Another hooded figure danced back, Kail's blade swishing across his opponent's stomach to tear fabric if not flesh.

Blindly, Kail followed with a backslash, cutting up and diagonally from hip to shoulder, driving forward in a rush as he'd seen Haig do.

Kali was not a novice to sword play. When he was younger, his father had decided to personally train Kali to fight. Never had the man paid him so much attention. Kail had reveled in it, learning all he could. His skills steadily grew, but his father's interest in teaching waned over the years in favor of seeing to his business and the security of his house. Kali could feel the burn of disuse in his sword arm.

He risked a glance at the old man. Haig had pulled the hood from the foe harrying him on the left. White-gold hair tumbled down a black cloak-Isslun's. She puckered her lips saucily at Haig even as her hand went for the dagger at her belt.

Haig got thete first. He slipped the weapon from its sheath and with a grin shoved her away. Immediately, an identical face from the right met him. Aliyea-twin to Isslun-had recovered from the hit with the vase and removed her hood to fight openly beside her sister.

Kail's sword went skittering across the marble floor. Distracted, he'd let himself be disarmed. "Haig!"

Haig hurled Isslun's dagger. The fang buried itself in the hood of Kail's opponent. Kail looked away, sickened, and saw Haig fighting for better position, backing the twins toward one of the smaller rooms off the main hall. "Follow me!" the old man yelled at him.

Kali hesitated. He still didn't know where his father was. The bulk of the fray seemed to be coming from the central garden; Haig was headed in the opposite direction. With a last look at white-gold hair and

whirling steel, Kail retrieved his sword and ran for the sunlight, ignoring Haig's voice calling after him.

In the heart of the garden, Kail found his father. Dhairr was alive and fighting, but he bled from several wounds. He straddled one fallen hood and fought two others who pressed him back against the lip of a fountain. This central point irrigated the entire garden; the water had been left to flow freely, turning the terrain off the raised stone walkways into a muddy jungle.

Kali ran down the flooded path, not allowing himself to think as he stabbed the black-robed figure closest to his father. The foe's back arched, and the dying assassin toppled over the side of the fountain, wrenching Kail's sword from his hands. Kail scrambled to get out of the way.

Dhairr looked up in shock to see his son. His remaining opponent backed away, hoisting up a dead comrade. Dhairr spun to see another hood charging at them through the mud, but instead of engaging, this one too, grabbed a body-that of the foe Kail had killed-and started to spirit it away.

"No!" A scream of pure agony and frustration tore from Dhairr's throat. He charged the escaping assassins, but water and wounds slowed him. He could not make the edge of the fountain before his legs gave out. He still grasped his sword in a white-knuckled fist. Kali dodged it and grabbed his father around the waist, gripping and hoisting him up.

"All back! All back!" Dhairr tried to pull away, but Kail held him tightly. Spittle flew from his mouth,

and he trembled wildly, slashing his sword at invisible foes. "Guards, to me! Bring one alive, damn you! Bring one alive!"

Bootfalls pounded from the direction of the main hall. Dhairr made an ugly sound in his throat. Kail turned, expecting another enemy, and saw Haig running out to them.

"Fathet!" Kail stayed the lord's arm as he swung his gaze and blade to the man. Recognition came slowly into Dhairr's eyes, and he lowered his weapon.

"Haig," he said hoarsely. "What happened?"

Kali spoke first. The words tumbled over each other to get out. "Isslun, Dencer…" he named them all, describing Aazen's wound and Haig's rescue.

Dhairr had both hands on Kail's shoulders, but he looked at Haig. "How many in total?"

"I can't be certain, my lord," Haig replied. "As it stands, I would trust none of your guard and appeal to the Esmeltaran militia for help."

Dhairr nodded, taking it all in. "Where is Kortrun?"

Boots scraped on stone, and all thtee of them looked up. Balram stood at the edge of the garden, near the stairs to Dhairr's office. He was watching them, a speculative look in his eyes as they fell on Haig.

"Captain," Dhairr said, relieved. "We were nearly overrun." He noticed the blood dripping from Balram's hand. "Are you all right?"

"I am," Balram said, walking slowly out to them. His sword trailed unsheathed at his side, its emerald winking in the sunlight. "Thank the gods you're both alive." The words held no inflection.

Haig's blade came up, but he stayed at Kail's side. He laid a hand on Kail's arm, as if he might draw him away from his father. "Your captain was one of those who betrayed you, Lord Morel," he said calmly. "Do not trust him."

Dhairr glanced sharply at Balram. "That can't be," he said. "Kortrun-"

"The accusation is fair," Balram replied, cutting him off and surprising a frown onto Dhairr's face. "But you should know its source before you judge." He raised his blade. Haig batted it aside with a clang that was loud in the stillness of the gatden. Balram merely smiled and pointed with the sword's tip at Haig's collar. A small silver pin glinted there, barely visible from the folds of cloth. Its crescent moon surrounded a harp and tiny stars. "A piece to rival even your finest work, my lord, if you'll forgive my saying so." His smile melted into a sneer. "We have a Harper in our midst." "Hatper?"

Dhairr started at the sound of his son's voice, as if he'd forgotten Kail was present. Kail stared at Haig, his hand outstretched to the man, too many questions pressing into his throat.

Balram continued, "There are traitors in your house, my friend,".he said to Dhairr. "This one, I warrant, is Alytia's wotk."

"Is this truth?" Dhairr asked. "Speak!" he shouted when Haig hesitated.

Haig met Kail's eyes briefly. "I was asked by the Harper Alytia Morel to see to her son's protection when she was forced to leave this house. I honored her request… and continued to do so after her death."

"No," Kali shook his head in denial even as the words sank into him like a cold kiss, through the heat, the buzzing of insects, and the tension of raised blades all around him. His chest seized up. His mothei… a Harper? Sent away? That was impossible. His mother died giving birth to him. His father told him the story long ago. Haig was confused, he was lying…

Beside him, Dhairr stood in a similar state of shock, but Haig's words did not have the same paralytic effect.

His gaze still on Kali, Haig never saw the attack coming.

Dhairr hit the Harper from the side, driving him to the ground. Haig's skull struck the fountain's edge, and Kali could see the whites of his eyes as he went limp. Dhaitr hauled him over and plunged him up to his neck in the fountain, jolting the man back to semi-consciousness.

"Not yet, not yet," Dhairi growled. The sudden outpouring of rage transformed him into a creature Kail did not recognize. Stunned, he fell back a pace.

"Before you die, you will tell me who hunts me!" Dhairr screamed. "Do you hear?" He shook the senseless Harper, plunging him beneath the water again. Haig's hands came up, spasming weakly. "Did Alytia send you to kill me? Is this her revenge?"

"Father, stop!" Kali grabbed Dhairr's shoulder, trying to wrench him off Haig. He pulled, gasping, pounding with his fists, but the lord's muscles were clenched balls of heat and strength. A boy couldn't hope to overpower him.

Kail felt a hand close over his throat, yanking him back. He glared hatefully up into Balram's eyes. "Liar," he gasped. Balram shook him.

"Now, now," he said soothingly, stroking a thumb across Kail's windpipe. "Leave them alone. You and I can entertain ourselves." He raised Kail to his toes. "You say Aazen was injured?" His jaw tightened. "How cateless of them. It was supposed to be you. And where is Aazen now, Kail?" Balram asked, his voice rising. "Alone... wounded? Did you leave him to die?" He pressed down. Spots clouded Kail's vision. Disgusted, Balram dropped him into the mud.

"He... alive," Kail choked. His tongue felt swollen in his mouth. Using one arm for leverage, he dragged himself through the ferns as Balram stalked unhurriedly after him. "Haig!" he sobbed, watching the Harper's body twitch as his fathet held him under the water for the space of a breath, two, three-too long.

"Father!" Kali screamed as he clumsily dodged a swipe from Balram's foot. "Stop! Help me!"

Balram kicked him in the ribs, knocking the air from Kail's lungs. He tried to curl into a ball, but Balram kicked him again. Kail's arm went numb. He lurched back, reaching desperately, but his father didn't seem to hear anything going on around him.

"If you do not resist, I will tell your father you died defending him," Balram promised, and the reassurance, the sincerity in his voice sent a horrible chill through Kali. He scooped up a handful of mud and hurled it into Balram's face.

The guard captain staggered back, and Kail ran-out of the garden, through the main hall and the double entry doors. He stopped when he saw Haig's horse standing on the track leading from the estate. His ribs burned-hard breathing sent a fire raging over them.

He stumbled to the horse and crawled up the animal's back. It neighed and balked, but eventually settled as Kail draped himself over its back and kicked its flanks. The horse sprang to life, but Kail didn't even glance at the direction it chose. He half-expected a hailstorm of arrows to follow him out the front gates. He buried his face in the horse's dark mane and waited, but he felt only the fire in his ribs and an awful, searing pain in his heart.

CHAPTER 4

Esmeltaran, Amn 12 Eleasias, the Year ofthe Sword (1365 DR)

Balram spat mud. The boy wouldn't get far. He raised his sword to the east tower, signaling Meraik. The man saluted and disappeared from view.

"Captain." Dencer hurried to him. He cast a wary glance at Morel, who crouched beside the fountain next to Haig's body floating in the water.

"Speak," Balram said, and added pointedly, "Kali yet lives."

"Fotgive me, Captain," Dencer said, and lowered his voice. "Haig interfered. My arrow missed the boy."

"And found its way into my son," Balram said grimly. "Forgive me," Dencer pleaded.

Balram regarded the man for a long time. "Bring my son home to me, Dencer," he said finally.

"I have already seen to it," Dencer said, visibly relieved. "Someone has healed him."

The Harper, Balram thought. "Begin a count of who is dead and who is merely wounded. If you find witnesses, silence them."

Dencer nodded and departed. Sheathing his sword, Balram went to Dhairr. The lord clutched the Harper's pin in his fist and watched the body float in

the fountain. He looked up at Balram like a lost child.

His mind is shattered, Balram thought. This will be easier than I could have hoped.

"Come away, my friend," he said. "It isn't safe for you here."

Dhairr stood unsteadily. He allowed Balram to lead him from the garden, up the stairs to his office. He paused along the way, murmuring, "Kali?"

Balram fixed an expression of sorrow on his face. "I am sorry, my lord. I'm afraid your son was in league with the Harper. I cannot be certain, but he may have helped the assassins gain entrance to the house."

"To kill me..." Morel's face turned ashen. "He is only a boy. The guards-he said they were traitors-"

"A lie," Balram said smoothly. He draped an arm over Dhairr's shoulder and pressed the object he'd been palming into the cloth of the lord's cloak and through, piercing the skin below his colfarbone with a needlelike point.

Dhaitr stiffened and tried to brush the stinging object off, but Balram held him fast, waiting for the magic to seep into his blood. When he was sure, he drew the object-a small, silver broach set with a square amethyst-out of Dhairr's skin and pinned it neatly to his cloak, as if it were an ornament that had always been there.

He supported Morel the rest of the way up the stairs and into the office, putting him in a chair. He took the one across the desk and waited, watching the magic swirl like winter clouds in his friend's eyes. Abruptly, Dhairr's vision cleared, and he sat up.

"Are you well, my friend?" Balram asked.

"Aye," Dhairr murmured, pressing both palms to his forehead. "What happened?"

"The wounds the Harper inflicted nearly overcame you," Balram said, rising. "I will send a servant in to tend them."

Dhairr touched the drying blood at his shoulder and temple. "The wounds, yes." He looked up at Balram. "I killed him?" he asked uncertainly.

"You slew the assassins who stalked you twelve years ago," Balram assured him. "Be at peace, my friend. You are safe."

"Safe," Dhairr repeated. He settled uncertainly in his chair as Balram strode from the room. When he was alone, he murmured, dazedly, "Kail."

Daen sat at the bottom of the stairway, his legs tucked up against his massive belly like a dam holding the floodwaters at bay.

"It appears you're finally learning, Kortrun," he remarked as Balram stopped and glared down at him.

The guard captain gritted his teeth. "My attempt failed," he said, "as you see."

"Spectacularly," Daen agreed, "but just as well. Now you can get on to the real business."

Had Balram not held the faint hope that the Shadow Thieves might give him another chance, he would have sliced open the fat rogue's belly where he sat. "What might that be?"

"Learning what it means to walk with us," Daen said, his manner turning serious. "How long do you think we would be able to continue our operations if we conducted our affairs in the manner you just displayed?"

"The Shadow Thieves object to the use of assassins?" Balram scoffed. "On what grounds? Morality?"

"Gods' laughter, no," Daen said. "We kill without hesitation… and without flair," he pointedly added, "unless the need arises. Only then do we draw attention to ourselves. Violent displays of death-dealing we do not require. We rely on Tethyr for that sort of high entertainment. I don't mind admitting, I despaired of you learning this lesson before it was too late." The rogue didn't appear the least concerned. "But rather than accept failure, you have turned your unfortunate mistake into a venture with promise. Lord Morel is now little more than a corpse, and you are holding his hand, directing him where to turn."

The description, however apt, sent an unexpected shudder through Balram. "And you prefer this… state of being?" he asked.

"Absolutely," Daen said. "Morel can keep making his baubles and increasing his fortune; you will continue to siphon the excess to your cause and, ultimately, to ours."

Balram pictured the look of childlike confusion in Morel's eyes and suppressed a wave of revulsion. "For how long?"

At that, Daen's gaze hardened. "As long as is required to convince me that you are worth my time and effort. Although, if it concerns you, I believe that Morel will perish of either the magic you used or the afflictions of his mind-perhaps both-long before his years catch up to him."

Aazen opened his eyes to the slanted wood ceiling of his room. A dull ache was all that remained of the searing pain in his shoulder. Blinking sleep away, he slid to a sitting position and rubbed a hand over the wound. It had closed completely, leaving the flesh smooth-a pink blemish in the surrounding pale.

His room-he was home, in Morel house. Aazen listened intently for the sounds of battle, for wounded cries, but he heard nothing. What had become of Kali and the assassins?

Footsteps echoed on the stairs-the familiar, purposeful tread of his father. Aazen pulled the quilt up to cover his healed wound, realizing immediately it was a useless gesture. Someone-Haig?-had brought him home-washed the blood from his skin. Likely his father had already seen the evidence of the magical potion.

"He cannot fault me," Aazen murmured. "I was unconscious. I was not responsible for what was done to me." He repeated the words like a protective charm. "He cannot blame me."

"You're awake." His father entered the room and perched on the edge of the bed. "Much has happened that we must discuss."

Aazen immediately sat up straighter. His father issued commands. He rarely offered to discuss anything with him, as one man would to another. "Kali and I were attacked at the lake," Aazen said, "by Dencer and men of Morel."

"I know," his father said calmly. "I orchestrated the attack."

Aazen opened his mouth, but no sound issued. He thought his father must be jesting, but by the look in Balram's eyes, Aazen knew he was not. Fear uncurled in his belly like an oily serpent. He swallowed and asked, "Why?"

"To slay Lord Morel and his son, to show out strength to the Shadow Thieves, that we might eventually gain a place among them," Balram explained. When Aazen only gaped, he went on, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you what I intended. I realize Kali is your friend. Dhairr was mine. Nothing about this decision was simple, Aazen, but I am trying to secure our future-your future. My actions were justified."

Aazen nodded automatically. He had heard such reasoning from his father before. When he awoke facedown on the floor, of his room with a loose tooth or swollen lips, or when his belly burned from lack of

food two days after some transgression, the actions were always justified. "Is Kail… are they dead?" he asked, striving to keep emotion out of the question. "Haig was with us-"

"Haig is dead," confirmed Balram, "but not by my hand. Dhairr killed him."

"Why?" Aazen hid his horror beneath confusion, which wasn't difficult. Morel, kill an ally? It made no sense.

"Haig was a Hatper," his father explained. "Morel has reason not to care for them. Dhairr still lives, but he is no longer a concern. He is under my control and believes his son to be a traitor. Kali, however, escaped. I do not know where."

Relief nearly caused Aazen to swoon. His friend was safe. * "Men loyal to me are searching for him right now," Balram continued. "The boy has seen too much to live." His gaze fixed intently on his son's face. "That's why I need your help, Aazen."

Aazen's fear intensified. "What can I do?"

"Nearly all of your time is spent with Kali. You must have secret places, hidden grounds for whatever foolishness the two of you concoct. Do not deny it," he warned softly as Aazen started to shake his head. "Kali has no other family, nowhere to run except such a place. If we do not find and silence him, if he manages to reach the authorities in Esmeltaran, they will learn what I have done.

"Think, boy," he said, mistaking Aazen's hesitation for a ¦ lapse of memory. "You must know a place. We

have to hurry. If I am caught, I will be killed."

Aazen frantically searched for a way out of his father's trap. His heart thudded wildly against his ribs. Betray Kail? It was unthinkable. Yet if he didn't, his father would be taken away, and it would be Aazen's fault. "I… I know of a place," he stammered.

Balram's face lit with an ugly smile. "Where?"

He would have to tread very carefully, Aazen thought, or his father would sense the ruse. The serpent in his belly threatened to rise up and choke him, but Aazen forced down the fear and guilt. "Near the lake-the Veshpel estate." He named a house that had burned in mid-Tarsakh. He waited a breath and added, as if it were of no consequence, "Many of us go there to explore the ruins."

The spark of triumph in his father's eyes dimmed. "Will it be occupied, at this time of day?" Balram asked.

"Possibly," Aazen said, and in truth, many of the local boys his age spent their free time among the blackened stones. But Kali would not go there for safety, of that he was certain. The estate was too near Morel house and too open to the world. There were better places to hide.

His father was silent, trying to determine the best course to take. Aazen prayed he would let him act, but that decision depended entirely on how much Balram trusted his son. In his heart, Aazen had always believed his father had little faith in him, and so he was surprised-and shamefully warmed-when Balram said, "Then you will have to do it." He

nodded, the idea seeming to gain merit, the more he considered it. "Kail trusts you. Take my horse. Find Kail in the ruins and draw him out, away from any watching eyes. You need not be the one to slay him," he assured Aazen, squeezing his sons shoulder briefly. "Draw him away, and we will be waiting."

Aazen sat silent a long time under his fathers penetrating gaze. This would be the critical test. If he gave in too readily, his father might grow suspicious. Aazen swallowed, hard and audibly in the quiet room. "No."

Balram's eyes narrowed a fraction. "No?"

"I can't betray him, Father." Aazen put a tremor in his voice, a weak, small titter that his father would not be able to tolerate. His father despised weakness. "Please don't ask me-"

The slap blurred the edges of Aazen's vision. His left eye immediately began to throb and water, but the blow had not been debilitating. His father meant only to silence him…

Obediently, he sat, teary-eyed, as Balram rose slowly to tower over him.

"I am asking you, boy," he said, his breath hot and sour on Aazen's face. "I am asking you to help me, to protect me, as I would lay down my life to protect you. Do you hate me so much that you would allow me to be taken, to be killed?" His eyes softened. The hurt crept in. The sight of it made Aazen sick to his stomach.

"No, Father!" he cried, "I don't hate you!" And that was the truth. The only person Aazen hated in that instant was himself. "No, of course not!"

"Of course not," his father repeated, his tone soothing. "You are becoming a man, a loyal son." He touched a large hand to Aazen's head and wiped the moisture away from his reddening eye. "I will bring my horse, and you will ride. Go swiftly, and do as I instructed. In the morning, all this will be a fading memory."

A memory, Aazen thought. If only his whole life could be someone else's memory.

CHAPTER 5

Esmeltaran, Amn 12 Eleasias, the Year of the Sword (1365 DR)

Kail swung off the horse. He seemed to fall a long way to the ground. He felt grass under his feet, and mud. In the colored twilight, he gazed up a steep hill speckled with what looked like small swaying firebrands.

The tangerine rose bushes were seasons old and thriving, planted one each in front of a dozen small headstones. The land he stood on belonged to Morel, the burial plots for servants who, had died without family in his father's employ. No one passing on the nearby lane would notice the graves, but the expensive flowers-grown for the memory of twelve servants whose names would never be recalled-were sure to be marked by all.

He climbed to the steepest side of the hill, leading Haig's horse up alongside him. Letting go of the horse's reins, he dropped to his knees between two markers. He began plucking at the grass, fingers and nails raking, searching for a seam. His father had shown him the place long ago, but Kail remembered this pair of stones clearly. His father had made him memorize the names: Seth Tarin and Rose Olindrake.

Mud and grass stains covered his hands. It was no good- he'd need something to cut through. Reluctantly, Kail stood and turned to Haig's horse. He felt around the saddle blanket to the bags draped on either side. He found a knife in one.

Movement from behind set every nerve in his body on edge. Kali spun, slashing blindly with the knife.

Aazen caught Kail's arm before he could drive the blade into his neck. "It's me," he said.

Breathing hard, Kail took a long time to focus on his friend and comprehend that he was not some specter from the surrounding graves. The knife fell forgotten to the grass. "What are you doing here?"

Then it came to him in a rush-Aazen's washed-out face, his swollen eye, and the grim set to his mouth. "Your father," Kali croaked. "He-"

"I know." Aazen nodded. Kali mirrored the gestute. It was all the acknowledgment either seemed capable of giving.

"He will kill you," Aazen said. "His men are hunting for you now."

"They don't know about this place," Kail said. He retrieved his knife and started digging.

Aazen scraped dirt aside with his hands. "You don't have much time," he said. He hesitated, looking at the ground. "These won't help you."

Kail's blade found the niche he'd been looking for, and he peeled the grass back, like slipping the lid off a stubborn box. Beneath lay a hollow space lined with wood and cloth. Two bundles of tightly wrapped linen were nestled on top of this, the larger tied with a rope to be worn on the shoulders. He drew them out reverently, as he'd seen his father do when he'd first shown them to Kali.

"I'm going back," he said, glaring into Aazen's skeptical eyes. "If I can just get to Father..."

"Your fathet believes you have betrayed him," Aazen said bluntly. "He is allowing mine to deal with you, in whatever way he sees fit."

Kail's gaze faltered. "You're lying," he said automatically. "Father would never believe I betrayed him."

"He has no say in the matter. Fathet has Morel under his control. I don't know how..." Aazen's mind seized on his healed wound. "Magic, perhaps."

"Magic." Kail's forehead wrinkled. Magic was only a vague concept to him, little more than a fixture in the stories his father used to tell of his mother. Fantastic and sometimes brutal as the tales had been, he'd only ever listened to the parts about the woman herself, soaking up every small detail...

No, Kali thought savagely, thrusting the memories away. All that had been a lie. "It doesn't matter," he said. "I'll go back and free him. I have these"-he clutched the bundles-"they have magic. Father told me. I'll kill Balram!"

The words rang out between them, and Kail sucked in a bteath, watching Aazen, hearing the words and their implications for the first time.

He'd just sworn to kill Aazen's father. In one day, their worlds had shattered. Nothing would ever be the same for either of them again.

Aazen said nothing at first, only smoothed the dirt and grass back in place over the hole. He looked up as the sun dipped below the horizon. "You have to leave the city. I was sent out to lead Father's men to wherever you might be hiding. I came to warn you, but I can't stay here. When Father realizes I've put him on a false trail, he'll be tracking me." Aazen stated into the distance, as if seeing something frightening in the datk. "I can't hide for long."

"He won't forgive you. He'll beat you to death and won't know he's doing it," Kali said bitterly. "You have to run."

They had no choice. Aazen was right. If Kail went back now, without his father's aid, he had no hope. It shamed Kail to admit his fear, but stronger than that was the anger, the fury at Balram and all he'd stolen from Kail's family. Balram wanted him dead. The only action Kail could take right now to thwart him was to stay alive.

Absotbed in thoughts and plans, Kail didn't notice Aazen's silence. His friend got to his feet and started walking, out into the dark. Abruptly, Kail realized what he intended and yelled, "You can't go back. You'll die!"

Aazen paused, not looking back. "No. I don't think... no. I'm all he has. He cares for me."

Kail's mouth twisted. "How can he? Your father's a murderer."

Aazen said, calmly, "So is yours."

And then, as if it had been waiting, the scene in the garden broke fresh in Kail's mind. He saw his father drowning Haig as the sun shone down and insects buzzed around theit bleeding wounds. He'd managed to block it out before, when he'd needed to escape, but Aazen's woids conjured the memory effortlessly.

Kail put his head in the grass and vomited. Sweat dripped between his shoulder blades, but he was so cold his fingers were numb. He tried to stand, but the sickness racked his body. Aazen made no move to help him.

"You said… you said he was under Balram's control!" Kali spat and wiped his mouth. "Father would never have killed Haig."

"Morel hates the Harpers. My father told me yout father had reason to want Haig's death." "No!"

Aazen looked down at Kail pityingly. "Get on your horse," he said. "Don't come back. Don't come after Balram. I'll have to… to kill you, if you do."

Then Aazen went, his footsteps shuffling dully through the gtass. Kail sat, frozen in shock, but he didn't call out again. He simply listened, his breath aching in his chest, as his best friend walked away from him.

Finally, his movements wooden, Kail tied the linen bundles on to his back and mounted. He pointed the horse in the direction of the city gates, picking his way in and out of sparse trees, avoiding the open fields of the cemetery wherever possible. After a dozen glances over his shoulder, he left his home behind.

The horse plodded on the road south, and when next Kali opened his eyes, he saw nothing but moonlight on grass and a row of carefully laid stones.

Kail thought he'd turned a complete circle, bringing him back to the same cemetery he'd left earlier that night. No, the stones were different-there were more here, older, and of elaborate design.

He slid down for a closer look, but the family names were none he recognized. A twisted oak overrun by tall grass and brush marked the border of the cemetery. Kali tied the hotse to the tree, out of sight, and settled on the grass.

For a long time he stared straight ahead, listening for the sounds of hoofbeats or footfalls that might indicate pursuit. Hearing none, he untied the bundles from his back and clutched them tight.

His empty gaze focused on one of the unfamiliar markers. The name "Alinore Fallstone" was catved deep into the stone next to some kind of symbol. There were more words written underneath the name in a language Kali did not recognize.

He stared at the symbols, at the incomprehensible language, until the words blurred and darkness fell completely over his mind.

CHAPTER 6

Esmeltaran, Amn 12 Eleasias, the Year of the Sword (1365 DR)

Balram waited at the door to Aazen's chamber. His gaze flicked briefly to Dencer, who'd found Aazen on the road and escorted him home. "Wait outside," he said.

Dencer nodded and shut the door, sealing them off from the rest of the house.

Aazen stood in the middle of the room, waiting, while Balram locked the doot and slowly turned. They stared at each other for a quiet breath, measuring, Aazen thought, how much had changed since they'd last spoken in this loom.

"Kail is gone?" his father asked at last. He already had the answer, but Aazen recognized what he really wanted to know.

"Kali is leaving Amn," Aazen said. "He knows that to stay is to die. Your secret is safe. I made sure of it," he added, and realized immediately that it was a mistake. He sounded too confident, too powerful, and Balram sensed it.

His fathet's eyes narrowed and something ugly broke on his calm, inscrutable face. "You made certain. You stood in this chamber and lied to me, took my life into your hands..." "I protected you."

"You were protecting Morel's whelp!" His father took a step forward. Aazen flinched. He couldn't help it. "You gave no thought to me."

"That's not true, Father," Aazen said quietly. "I give evety thought to you, every breath of my life."

"What is it you want, Aazen?" his father asked, his tone altering to curiosity. "You could have gone with Kail. You were clever to lead me asttay, more careful than I gave you credit for. I will never make that mistake again," he added, his face darkening. "Yet you returned to me."

"Yes. I want nothing from Kail."

"Why did you come back?"

Aazen would never know why, just as he had never understood the desire that clawed him from the inside. The galling need to please his father, to win approval from this man, this thing who might kill him with a misplaced blow-the need would destroy him one day. He knew that, accepted it, because he could not do otherwise.

He tried to hide the helplessness he felt, but his father saw, and he smiled-a small, satisfied expression. Satisfied because he still had a loyal son, or because he had a pawn he could twist and control? Aazen wondered. Deep down, he knew it was the latter, and for one burning instant, he hated his father as he had never hated anything in his life. Then the feeling was gone, fading to ash as Balram put a hand on his shoulder.

"We will talk more of this later. Foi now, all that matters is you chose to return."

"Yes, Father," Aazen said. Resignation drained the anger as it had long ago drained the fight out of him. He barely registered the change in pressure at his shoulder, the alteration from affection to purpose-his father's hand slowly turning him to face the wall.

Then there was only pain.

Kail awoke to the sound of a falling tree.

He scrambled up and around Alinore's grave as the sun disappeared, blotted out by the falling trunk. It struck the forest floor with a deafening thud.

Forest… Kail's head whipped around. Trees surrounded him, and in the distance, a cap of mountains graced the southern sky. Haig's horse was gone, and so was the cemetery. All that remained were the bundles he'd been clutching against his chest and Alinore's grave.

Wrong… wrong, all wrong. Was he dreaming? Then…

"Watch out, you!" A terrific weight slammed him from behind, knocking him to the ground as another tiunk fell past his vision.

"That the last of them, by the bloody gods?" shouted a second, muffled voice.

"All clear." The crushing weight fell away, and Kali saw a man peering down at him, haloed by a sea of leafy green. The man's eyes were large and startlingly blue against a dirt-smothered face, and

his ears curved as if the tips had been threaded through a needle. On rare occasions, Kail had seen half-elves in Esmeltaran, but never one so large as the figure staring at him now.

"Six young oaks! Six of Nine Hells, that's what you're in for," said the muffled voice again, this time at Kail's elbow.

Kali shrieked as a head burst up from the loose dirt where only a few breaths ago a tree had swayed. A hand followed to wipe the dirt out of a black beatd on a pitted, distinctly human face.

"Garavin drew the map," the half-elf said, a bit defensively.

The head and the arm weren't having any of it. "Which you strayed from by a full thirty steps! Look, you." The human's other arm burst up, spraying Kail with more dirt. He flapped a crude drawing in front of the half-elf s blue gaze. "Any more off and you'd have taken the Weir!"

As the pair continued to argue over him, Kali started to slide backward, groping for a weapon, a stick, a rock, anything.

His hand closed on a branch that had been torn away from one of the falling trees. He raised it, and fire licked along his ribcage. Gasping, Kail dropped the branch and fell back, clutching his side.

Immediately, the half-elf crouched over him, his hands probing along Kail's flank. Feebly, Kali tried to push him away, but the man only grinned and muttered, "Cease." His brow furrowed as he

examined Kail's wounds. "Get Garavin," he said to his companion. "I think the boy slipped through Alinore's gate."

"Wouldn't be the first," the bearded man grumbled. Instead of hauling himself the rest of the way out of the dirt, the man disappeared back into the earth, pulling his diawing with him.

"What is your name?" the half-elf asked when they were alone. "Who attacked you?"

"Kail," Kali said before he thought better of it. He jerked his head to the south, but kept his eyes fixed on the stranger. "The mountains-they're in the wrong place."

The half-elf nodded. "If you were lying in Esmeltatan's countryside last night, I daresay they are. Those are the Marching Mountains, not the Cloud Peaks. You've come a long way in a short sleep, Kali."

The Marching Mountains-Kali summoned a mental map. He'd crossed the lake, the Wealdath… the Starspires, by the gods… all those miles. His mind boggled. "How?" he asked.

"My sister's fault, entirely," said a new voice, rough and engulfed by a deep, canine bark.

Kail looked up and saw the animal first, a lumbering bronze mastiff with folds of flesh dangling off its ribs and paws the size of a man's fist. Matching its stride-barely-was a dwarf with skin the color of dead leaves and a full, matching beard that fell nearly to his knees. As the dwarf bent over, Kali could see the

hair was as wire-hard as the spectacle frames wedged in front of the dwarPs brown eyes.

The human whose head and arm Kali had glimpsed earlier trailed behind him, dirt-covered and oddly tall and gangly next to the dwarf. In profile, the man's face tapered and curved so prominently that Kail could have hung a cloak from his chin. Gesturing animatedly, he tried in vain to slide his parchment drawing under the dwatf's thick nose. The shorter figure's attention was entirely fixed on Kali.

"My name is Garavin Fallstone," the dwarf said in an oddly formal accent. He extended a hand. When Kali only continued to stare uneasily at the group, a corner of the dwatf's mouth turned up. "Ye need fear no attack from me or any of mine," he said, his voice quiet but still rough as a boot scrape. "Laerin"- he nodded to the half-elf-"would have been about telling ye the same thing, had I not interrupted." He deftly plucked up the human's parchment, folded it, and slid it away in a pocket of his brick-colored vest. "The other here is Morgan, and the dog's Borl. They're not brigands, at least not tight now."

"Delvar," Laerin said, as if that should explain everything.

"Means we dig." Morgan glared at the half-elf. "Anyways, some of us dig, and some of us come within a druid's death of slaughtering thousand-year-old trees!"

"Laerin knows the difference between a young oak and a considerably more established Weir," the

dwarf intetjected smoothly. "No true harm was done. Morningfeast for one more, if ye please, Morgan."

"I'll see to it." Morgan continued to glare at the half-elf as they strode off together into the trees.

"Do ye have brothers?" the dwarf asked incongruously as he took a seat on the ground next to Kail.

A memory of himself and Aazen on the sparkling lake flashed before Kail's eyes. Mutely, he shook his head.

"Neither do I. I took my time growing accustomed to Morgan and Laerin. Ye'll want to do the same." He smiled. "Though I'll make a wager ye give yer parents enough headaches for ten brothers."

Kail glanced sideways at him. "You're trying to get me to talk," he said.

"Aye," Garavin agreed, still smiling easily. "I'm needing to Jcnow if ye have family looking for ye. If so, I can save them the worry and send ye back through the grave-don't mind the expression, it's really a portal. But Morgan tells me ye've been in a fight, and more than a small scuffle. If that's true, and ye've trouble of another sort following ye, then I'm needing to know how many of my diggers to pull out of the ground to defend ye." The smile disappeared, but the dwarf s voice was gentle and matter-of-fact.

"They don't know where I've gone," Kali said. "At least, I don't see how they could."

"Or they would have followed by this time," Garavin said, nodding. "By 'they,' I take ye to mean the trouble and not the family?"

"I have no family."

"I see." Garavin said, as if he'd heard the same raw-voiced statement many times before. "The choice is yer own, then." He pointed to Alinore Fallstone's marker-weed-grown, but in all other ways identical to the grave Kail had fallen asleep beside in Amn. "It's not truly a grave, ye see. I never had a sister, but if I did, I'm relatively certain she'd be appreciating the jest." Kali almost missed the wink Gatavin shot him. "As I said, it's actually a portal. There're several hereabouts. A tiavelet in a rush can fly the Weave all the way to the Great Rift if he uses his head and knows where to set his feet."

"I don't know anything about that," Kail said. "I came here by accident."

"By falling asleep in a cemetery, weeping atop a stranger's grave." Garavin rummaged in a pouch that rode at his hip. He pulled out a vial of milky liquid that Kail recognized immediately. "Most folk of Amn haven't that much sentiment in them, and mores the pity." He held the vial out to Kail. "Drink it all."

Kail took the vial but did not drink. "I wasn't weeping." In truth, he remembered little about the previous night and his sleep, but he wasn't going to admit that to the dwarf. "How did I get here?" he repeated.

Garavin's keen eyes glinted like twin agates. "Drink and I'll tell ye."

Kali shrugged and drained the vial, feeling the warm liquid course down his throat. The fire that had burned in his ribs since the night before gradually began to cool, and Kail took his first easy breath with a sighing pleasure. He stopped, wary, when he noticed Garavin watching him closely.

"Ye're quite trusting," the dwarf remarked lightly.

"I'm not..." Kali started, then hesitated, his eyes going dark as they regarded the dwarf.

But Garavin waved away his suspicion. "No, no. Forgive my rudeness. I did want to see to yer wounds, but I have an awful curiosity. If I had a sister, I'm knowing for a fact she would have remarked on it. I found myself wondering what ye knew of the Art, one so young and full of Amnian blood. Yer eyes rounded at my talk of portals, yet ye took the healing potion as if ye knew exactly what it was."

"I know what magic is," Kail said sullenly. "Enough, anyway. I asked how it brought me here."

"So ye did, and my apologies again, for prolonging the mystery." Garavin stood and walked to the false grave, toeing aside dirt and dead branches to reveal a loose circle of stones. "Ye'll have to picture it-the portal in Amn is a mirror to this one, though with a different trigger. I'm guessing about here's where ye were lying." He put a boot in the circle. "Tears are the key to yer mystery-or a few drops of water, whatever's handy. If a body-a living body, mind you-steps in the circle and sheds three or four tears, or a thimbleful of water, the portal will activate, and he'll

be somewhere else in the next eye blink." The dwarf smiled, clearly pleased with himself. "Most folk won't be shedding any tears over the grave of someone who never existed, and a good thing, considering how the portal stands in the open. Keeps folk from stumbling into countries they didn't mean to."

"What if it rains?" Kali asked curiously.

The dwarf chuckled. "Ye've an active mind. The portal is sunk beneath the grass blades, so it cannot easily be seen. The rest we leave to luck and hope that no one will be walking about in a cemetery during a storm or crying atop the grave. Ye have the unfortunate honor of beating our odds this time."

Kali crouched outside the circle. From a distance, the stones appeared to be ordinary rocks, but up close, he recognized the same symbol he'd seen carved next to Alinore's name. "Who put the portal here?" he asked. "You?"

Garavin shook his head. "No, lad. I haven't the Art, either. I only drew the map. That's what I do. I make maps and scout tunnels and hunt up knowledge-for myself, and those who need it done."

Kail looked in the direction Morgan and the half-elf had gone. Garavin followed his gaze. "When I need them to, my diggers-those two, and others ye haven't seen-dig. We're always needing more tunnels, it seems." He gave a mock wince. "At times, they dig in the wrong places, but no one's perfect."

"If the portal's a secret, why are you telling me about it?" Kail asked, suspicious again.

"Because yer eyes are asking, and yer mouth will follow once I get ye to the camp for morningfeast, so I thought I should get a head start on the day." Garavin turned, his wide, muscled body rolling like a loaded wagon. "If ye've enemies out searching, it's not wise-for either of us-to send ye through the portal just now. Eat with us, and we'll talk some more."

Kali wasn't sure. He watched the dwarf and the huge dog, which was sniffing around the packages Kail had unearthed in the cemetery.

Garavin whistled, and the dog's head came up. It fell into step beside its master. The dwarf set an unhurried pace through the trees, as if appreciating both the forest and his place in it.

Kail opened his mouth to ask another question, but Garavin, anticipating him again, tossed back over his shoulder, "The forest is named Mir. Ye're breathing Calishite ait now."

Kail smelled the camp before they reached the site. The scent of cooking sausages and the sharp, starchy tang of potatoes made his stomach burn.

They broke through a tree line, where the land dipped into a wide-lipped oval bowl of tamped down grass. At the bottom swirled half a dozen people, dwarves and humans in equal number, with more spilling out of a square, two-story hut. The trees curved up in tense green spires around the scene.

"How many are there?" Kail asked as they descended. There were more figures coming out of the hut than seemed possible for it to hold.

Garavin didn't answer but guided him through the crowd. Some of the diggers looked Kail over curiously as Garavin and he passed them by, but most congregated at four large water • barrels under the hut's eaves, 01 took seats on the grass with bowls of sausage and potatoes. All gave way or nodded respectfully to Gatavin when they saw him.

The door to the hut was propped open with a large piece of shimmering quartz. Inside, it was dark and humid, and smelled strongly of earth. Ahead of them, Kali could see two ladders poking up into a second-floor loft, which was curtained off. A table and four rickety-looking chairs sat to his left. To the right there was a gaping hole in the ground. More ladders rested against its insides like exposed ribs, descending at least fifteen feet into the ground.

Kail watched as torch- and candlelight bobbed in the darkness at the bottom: more diggers. "What are they doing?" he asked.

Garavin glanced up from the table, where he'd spread out a map. "Forging an outpost, of sorts. Goblins are stirring to the south and east of here, and with Myth Unnohyr hanging above our heads in the north, I-and certain other interested parties-would like to see a wall put between them."

He looked up as a squat, crooked-nosed dwarf appeared at the door. The newcomer's beard was as fair as Garavin's was dark.

Garavin tucked his spectacles away and nodded at Kali. "Take the lad out and get him a bow), Aln." To Kail, he said, "I won't be long."

Aln jerked a thumb toward the door, and Kail reluctantly followed him out into the yard.

" 'Ere." The fair-bearded dwarf thrust a bowl and a mug of water under Kail's nose. "Eat. We'll be 'ere a while. Fool elf brought down the wrong trees-think an elf d know better, but ye'd be wrong. Garavin'll be a while patching things up."

Kail nodded, tearing the end off his sausage with his teeth. The meat scotched his tongue, but he barely noticed. He'd had nothing to eat since the previous morning.

Aln eyed Kail as he wolfed down the food. "What of yerself? Are ye staying, then?"

Kail shook his head, though in truth he had no idea where he intended to go. With the immediate threat of pursuit lifted, he had time to think, but he had no gold, no food, and now no horse to carry him. All he had were the items he'd dug up in the cemetery, and he wasn't desperate enough to try to sell them. Not yet.

A shadow fell on either side of Aln as Laerin and Morgan joined them on the grass.

"We were just talking about ye," Aln said darkly.

Laerin gave a good-natured wince. "Feeling better?" he asked Kail.

Kail started to nod, then yelped, "Stop!"

But Morgan had already unfolded the wrappings on the latgest of his packages. "Whatevet you've got in

here's going to rot under these moldy things…" He caught his breath. "Abbathor's hoard," he murmured, drawing out a length of blade.

"Don't speak that name here!" Aln hissed, holding his bowl high as Kail practically crawled over the dwatf s lap to get at Morgan.

"Put that down," Kali snarled, but by now the whole group could see the sword.

The blade was unremarkable, in need of polish and sharpening. But the hilt-veins of platinum ran in swirling designs like a wild river across the guard. The largest Morel emerald lay embedded in the pommel.

"Flawless," Morgan said as Kail tote the weapon from his reluctant hands.

"Are you sure?" Laerin asked, leaning forward curiously.

"Boy probably stole it," Aln muttered.

" 'Course I'm sure," insisted Morgan. "I've appraised more gems than this lot has fingers and toes. Look here, no imperfections." He reached for the sword again, but Kail reacted without thinking, slapping Morgan's knuckles with the flat of the blade.

"Hey, watch it, you!" Morgan half-rose, and Kail scuttled away, raising the blade to chest level. The bigger man immediately took a step back, lifting his hands.

"Stay away." Kail's arms trembled with the effort of holding aloft the big sword. He swung it clumsily between Morgan, who still glared angrily at him, and Aln, who simply looked bored. Some of the camp turned to watch, but most had gone back to their own conversations.

"It's all right, Kali." Laerin stood, and as Kail swung to face him, caught the dull blade in his bare palm. "No one here is going to hurt you, or attempt to take what is yours." He shot a meaningful glance at Morgan. The big man threw up his hands and sat back down, muttering to himself.

"A fine sword," the half-elf said, apparently heedless of the dot of blood that welled between his flesh and the blade. He gave Kali a level look. "Yours?"

"My father's," Kali said carefully. "Now mine."

"Too heavy for you now," Laerin said. When Kail only stared at him mulishly, Laerin casually released the blade. The point thudded to the dirt.

Aln snorted with laughter.

"You need a lighter weapon," Laerin said, ignoring him. "Morgan"-he flicked a hand-"give me your fairer blade."

Morgan looked up from his meal, scowling. "Don't call it that. And if you think I'm giving anything to that little piece of-"

"You owe him," Laerin cut in. "You put your hands where they didn't belong."

"Your self-righteous arse does the same thing whenever it's given half a chance!"

"Fine, then. Shall I tell the boy how Gatavin's prying into your own past was rewarded, when we first came here?"

For whatever reason, that shut the man up. He stood, glared at Laerin, and unsheathed a short sword from his belt. He tossed it at the half-elf, who caught it easily, this time by the hilt.

"My thanks. Now." He offered the weapon to Kali, wiping his bloodied hand on his breeches.

Cautiously, Kail placed the priceless sword lengthwise between them. He grasped the hilt of the offered blade and raised it with one hand.

"When you are older," Laerin said, "you will be as tall and as broad as I am. My father was of your blood-thick in the chest and arms. People will think you're a brawler, but you'll be able to wield that"-he pointed a toe at the sword lying in the dirt-"with grace and ease."

Kail nodded, then noticed Garavin silhouetted in the hut's doorway.

"Laerin is correct about yer abilities," said the dwarf. He came forward, lifting Kail's sword from the dirt. "Ye should be taking care of such a precious thing." His eyes closed briefly, as if he were absorbing some invisible resonance from the blade. "It will serve ye more than well... but not today," he said, addressing the last part to Laerin.

The half-elf nodded solemnly. Then he bowed briefly to the dwarf, winked at Kali, and left them.

Kali watched him move gracefully around the camp, giving instructions, until he realized Garavin still held his sword. Awkwardly, he took the blade, letting it rest beside him.

"I'm afraid we must put off out talk a bit longer, lad," Garavin said, his brow furrowing apologetically.

Kail nodded, though he couldn't imagine what the two of them had to discuss. Just before the dwarf disappeared inside the hut, Kail said, "I'm not staying here."

Garavin paused and gave a nod. "Then it looks to be a very short conversation."

CHAPTER 7

Forest of Mir, Calimshan 13 EUasias,

the Year of the Sword (1365 DR)

Garavin's diggers worked in shifts of six, with two torch-bearers standing nearby to offer additional light and water when needed. Every few candles the shift would change, but the resting group would stay together in its own cluster, eating, talking, and occasionally shooting glances Kail's way. He ignored them, preferring to spend the time resting and watching.

As night fell, Morgan brought out tin buckets filled with tallow and arranged them in circles throughout the camp. When lit, the bucket candles gave off a peaceful glow like grazing fireflies. The evening meal came next: seasoned bread chunks and ham sliced off the bone by the same man who had served bteakfast. The diggers, drawn by the smell of food, gathered again in the clearing, and Garavin joined them, the great dog Borl trailing behind him.

The dwarf chewed a short-stem pipe and had a book wedged beneath one aim. He bypassed the food line, instead heading for one of the few trees in the bowl-shaped clearing.

Large silver-sheened leaves hung around a trunk that looked as if it had been split, long ago, by weight or perhaps by a lightning strike. One half had died, but the other portion thrived. Garavin sat in the space between the living and the dead halves. With his datk, weathered skin, he looked almost a

part of the tree, a face staring out of the bark. He smoked, read, and watched the activities of the camp, while the mastiff slept at his feet.

Kail ate with Laerin and Morgan again, listening to them discuss the day's progress, but his eyes kept straying to Garavin. Finally, Laerin nudged him.

"Go," he said simply.

The dwarf did not look up from his book as Kali approached, and Kali wondered if he'd fallen asleep. Then a plume of smoke rose from Garavin's pipe, and his eyes followed. He nodded at the withered bit of stump, and Kali sat.

"Well? What do ye think of my diggers, Kail?"

It wasn't the question Kali had expected, so he said the first thing that came to mind. "They're not like you."

Garavin smiled. "Well, let's suppose ye and I were to mark a map of Faerun with the birthplaces and travels of all those lads and lasses ye saw today. Ye'd still be about it when winter came, and it would take a lifetime and more to walk in theit footsteps."

"They came all that way, just to end up here-to dig?" Kail asked in disbelief.

"Not by intent," Garavin said. "They came because they had nowhere else to go-much like ye, which is why I thought we should be talking."

"I have a home," Kail said. "I never wanted to end up here."

"I understand, and I can send ye back to Amn quick enough," said Garavin, "but that way leads to a quick death, or am I mistaken?"

Kali shook his head. "But I will go back someday," he said, meeting Garavin's eyes.

"I do not doubt ye," Garavin said, acknowledging the vow solemnly. "What I mean to do is offer ye a course for the intervening time. My diggers have been following a generally westward path since Nightal last," he said. "Our work in Mir and the surrounding area will take a pair of years, perhaps more, but once we reach the Shining Sea, I intend to run north for a bit. I could offer ye a place with us now, and give ye the option of leaving us when ye choose. Understand, I'm not in the habit of making this gesture to everyone. I need to keep a certain number of diggers in the company at a time. If I have too many, food will run short. Too few and we're weak on defense. But this way, ye could remain near the place ye're most wanting to be, and learn my trade in the meantime."

"I already know how to dig," Kail said, but he listened.

"This is different," Garavin said. "The first tenday will break yer back. Ye'll hate it, curse it... and me, come to think. The second tenday ye won't be able to keep yer eyes open, so ye won't have time to be thinking or cursing about anything-not the past, nor the future beyond putting one boot in front of the other. After that, as ye adjust, ye'll be having nothing but time. That is precious time-to consider

yer place in the world and what ye intend to do with it."

Kali didn't need to consider eithet of those things. He pictured Balram, secure in his father's house, as night fell in the Forest of Mir. He replaced the image with one of himself, plunging his father's sword deep into the guard captain, feeling whatever magic the blade contained slide out, into his enemy. His father would be free-Aazen would be free-and Kail's life could return to what it once had been. Nothing else mattered.

"Why do you dig?" Kail looked at the dwarf, and a glint of green winking from a gap in his beard drew Kail's eyes downward. "What is that?" he asked.

Garavin lifted the object-a pendant-by its chain. Kail recognized the components first: smooth carnelian worked into the shape of a mountain; nestled within it, a faceted emerald shone like a doorway.

"Dugmaren Brightmantle is why I dig," Garavin said. He pointed to the swaying pendant. "Dumathoin guides the shovel."

"Dumathoin." Kail touched the seam, the joining of emerald to mountain, and felt the scratch of electricity run through his fingers.

"I serve the gleam in the eye and the keeper of secrets," Garavin continued, "because in addition to having an awful curiosity, I've dug far enough into the earth to uncover things that should-and shouldn't-be made known to greater Toril. Dumathoin helps me with the sorting out of which is which."

"You hunt knowledge," Kail said, remembering what Garavin had told him in the forest.

"Yes-and secrets. I can find them, and I can keep them. Ye should remember that, if ever ye're needing someone to talk to." He puffed unconcernedly on his pipe as Kali looked away. "If ye do stay, Laerin could teach ye things-they all could, I'm knowing that. But first ye'd learn to dig. That rule never changes."

The sound of raucous laughter at some unheard jest drifted out to them from the camp.

"They're gods, then," Kali said, listening to the forest stir with nighttime sounds. "Dugmaren and Dumathoin."

"Of the dwarf folk," Garavin nodded. "Most of my band is of Dugmaren's mind. They are discoverers-explorers. Dwarf or human, they fit nowhere else, so Dugmaren takes them all."

"Why should a dwarf care what happens to me?" Kali said without thinking, and felt heat rush up his neck. He plunged on. "I don't want to be an explorer. I've got nothing to offer Dugmaren."

"Ye have two hands, and an active mind, as I've already noted," Garavin said. "Even if Dugmaren wasn't interested, I'd still take ye."

Kali refused to meet the dwarfs eyes. "Why?"

"Because at one time or another, we all get trapped in the place ye are now." Garavin leaned forward, his

grave face filling Kail's vision. "Do ye know what we do about it?"

Kali started to shake his head, but stopped when he saw

Garavin's eyes twinkling with humor. He caught on and said, in perfect unison with the dwatf, "We dig ourselves out." Kali snorted-not quite a laugh, but something lighter than what had been in his mind. His voice only shook slightly when he said, "I'm going to need a large shovel."

"There ye go." Garavin chuckled, jostling the pipe and sending ashes flying. "Ye'll be fine, Kail."

He slept in the map room the fitst night. That's what. Garavin called the curtained off loft at the rear of the hut. The tiny room was jam-packed with maps, drawings, and rolls of parchment filled to the edges with scrawled notes. In one corner, a cot and blankets were wedged under the eaves, almost as an afterthought.

Kail lay on his back, his nose inches from a ceiling beam, wide awake. For lack of anything to do, he circled the room with his eyes again and again-past Garavin's pipe, left lying on a table next to a comfortable-looking chait, then to the oval cut-out window, with Sehine's pale glow filtering through, then back to the beam.

By the fouf teenth pass, he was up and at the window, watching the forest. His sword lay on a bench beneath the window, nearly translucent in the moon's glow. The other dirt-encrusted package and

his borrowed sword sat in shadow as if in awe of the bright sword.

If anything should happen to me, Kail…

That had been his father's commandment. If anything happened, what was between the graves belonged to Kali. The only bit of magic Dhairr Morel would permit in his life, buried deep in the earth.

Kali touched the swotd with his knuckle, a light touch, enough to cool his skin on the steel. He felt nothing, certainly not the gentle jolt he'd gotten from Garavin's holy relic. What, then, could the sword possibly contain?

The distant sound of chimes drew Kail from his reverie. The haunting, beautiful echo seemed incongruous when wrapped around the normal forest noise. Was it a call to worship from some hidden temple? Kail wondered. He'd already witnessed so many things he'd never thought to see. Who knew what this latest mystery might portend?

The chimes came again, closer, and then Kali saw the herd.

The mist stags came into the clearing between the hut and the forest, weaving among the trees like stealthy phantoms. They were the size of spry colts, their pelts steely gray but sprinkled liberally with silver. The bucks' antlers curved inward in conical shapes, and the stags had a wisp of beaid at their chins. They ran in graceful, springing motions, as if their feet trod air instead of grass.

A spear tip caught the moonlight as it came out of the trees. Kail sucked in a breath, fearing a hunter stalked the beautiful creatures. He heard the chimes again and realized the sound wasn't coming from the animals, but from their shepherd.

The druid stepped into the clearing, shepherding the bucks. Her gaze lifted to his window, and she stared at him through the dark triangle of her hooded cloak. She couldn't have been much older than he, Kali thought.

The mist stags flowed around her, making small sounds that sounded like alarm. The girl angled her head to listen.

The trees behind her exploded in a fireball.

Heat blasted Kail in the face. He dived below the level of the window, instinctively clawing at his face to feel if he was burned. His skin was warm and slick, but unmarked.

Lurching to his feet, Kali returned to the window, scanning the trees for some sign of the girl, but there was nothing, only the panicked herd scattering in every direction. A tree was ablaze, and there came frantic shouts from inside and outside the perimeter of the camp. The small hut quivered with the pounding of feet on floorboards and ladders.

Kail grabbed his sword and tossed it out of the window. He slung a leg over the curved sill and eased himself out, scraping his belly over the wood. He lowered himself until he hung by his fingertips, then dropped.

Retrieving his sword, he trotted quickly away from the hut, into the chaos of the forest.

She couldn't have gotten far, Kail reasoned as he ducked into the trees. He was so absorbed in trying to pick out her hooded form in the darkness that he didn't see the goblins until they were almost on top of him.

Dark, mottled shapes poked swords out of the smoke. Kail froze, hoping his frantic movements hadn't given him away. There were five of them arranged in a hunting party, torches flickering at its rear. In the flickering light, Kali glimpsed a cracked, filth-encrusted gauntlet wrapped around an equally grimy arm. He dropped into the shadows of one of the huge old oaks and watched the gauntlet pass by.

At the edge of the clearing, the party halted. The lead goblin pointed to Garavin's hut, and the others nodded, shaking their weapons and grunting like two-legged swine. They moved in a haphazard line, with no real leader keeping them in check.

Kali thought he was safe, but the last goblin in line suddenly thrust his torch in Kail's direction, spilling light on his face. An exuberant cty went up, and the goblin broke away from the pack to charge at him. The creature swung the torch playfully, as if batting at an insect.

Kail sidestepped, and felt the heat kiss his ear. He'd never liked fire. He would rather face a thousand deaths by drowning than be burned. When he was seven, he'd tripped and fallen in a dying campfire. The blisters on his hands and arms had been

agonizing, and though the scars were mostly healed, he'd lost many of the sensitive nerves in his hands. He would never be a painter or a sculptor, but he could still wield a swotd.

He raised his father's blade, backed into the tree, and twisted, putting the trunk between himself and the goblin. He knew he had to run. If he didn't lose them in the trees, they'd simply ring him in until they wore him down.

Kail's toe caught an exposed toot. He fell and felt the wind whoosh out of his lungs. The goblin's torch came around the tree, but the creature's laughter was drowned out by pounding feet and harsh breathing that passed close to Kail's face. Their owner smelled of blood.

Panicking, Kali rolled blindly away, and saw Borl leap over him. The jump carried the huge mastiff into the goblin's chest.

The creature put its arms around the dog, clawing, and both went clashing into the underbrush. Borl snarled viciously as the goblin screamed and thrashed. Its torch went out, plunging the immediate atea into darkness. The goblins scattered in the direction of the burning trees, confused and terrified by the screams of their comrade.

Kali started to stand and found himself pulled back down by his shirt. He rolled onto his back to free himself and swiped the air, expecting an attack from above. A hand caught his wrist, and he found himself staring into the face of the young girl.

Up close, Kali saw that mottled brown and green paint streaked her face and hands, and her hair was tied back and buried in her hood. Trees and starlight haloed her; she blended into her surroundings like a wraith.

Kail opened his mouth, but she put a tense finger to his lips to keep him silent. He listened, picking up a second set of footsteps approaching fast in the wake of the first hunting party. More goblins, more fire, he thought.

"Are the diggers in the forest?" he whispered around her finger.

The girl nodded, lifting her gaze from him to the ttees. Far off, a sound rose over the tramping of goblin feet, an echo like the chanting of a choir at temple. In its wake, a brilliant flash lit the night, casting the atea into sharp, blue-white telief. Kali flinched under the power, the nearness of the lightning, but the girl paid it no attention. She stated straight ahead. Her lips moved, but Kali couldn't hear what she said. The entire scene felt like a dream, except he could smell the smoke, the dirt, and the reek of goblin sweat.

The girl stopped speaking, and when she did, a frail mist began to build around them. At first Kail thought it was the fire, but the fog was cool and smelled of an herb he could not place. The mist thickened, drifting against the wind to veil their hiding place. It pushed into the ranks of the marching goblins, obscuring them from view. Panicked grunts drifted out of the cloud, and the druid smiled grimly.

From the underbrush she plucked her spear. It was lighter and sleeker than it had first appeared, with a wicked barbed point. Below the blade dangled a clustet of oak leaves and what looked like tiny silver bells on a cord. Raising her weapon to her shoulder, the girl cast it into the fog. A soft, singing chime echoed within the mist-the same sound Kail had heard from the hut-followed by a solid thud and a goblin scream.

The girl drew out another spear, turned to him, and mouthed something. Kail shook his head to show he did not understand. The girl spoke again, just as silently, and Kail stared at her. Tossing her hood back impatiently, she stood and crept around the tree, using the trunk to guide her steps.

She led him to a large boulder nestled between two more of the great oaks, like a stone in a giant's sling. In the lee of the stone and the trees, they were much less exposed.

The girl wedged two fingers inside a pouch clipped to her belt. She pulled out two cream-colored stones.

Kail was not the expert in gems his father was, but he could tell immediately the stones had no value-they had likely been picked from a riverbed or the forest floor. But she held them as close as Kali had kept his sword. She took his hand, put one stone in his palm and kept the other for herself.

Put it in your pouch, she said. Her sudden voice in the dark startled him. / forget, sometimes, who bear the stones and who do not.

"What are they?" asked Kail.

The stones are enchanted to give me speech your ears can hear, the druid explained. It need not touch yourflesh. Only keep it near you, and we can speak.

Kail slid the stone in his pouch. "Who are you?" he asked.

Cesira, the woman said. Or the Quiet One ofSilvanus, as the Starwater Six-the druids-are fond ofcalling me.

Kail jumped, startled, as mist rose around him again, plucking at his waist. Then he saw the antlers and realized the herd had regrouped-and not just the males. The frail mist coalesced under his hand and became a gray-black doe. Without thinking, Kail reached out to touch its fur, but his hand passed right through the doe's lithe body. He pulled back in shock.

Around him, other females appeared from nowhere, some with tiny fawns, all as translucent as the one that stood beside him. Its large black eyes regarded him steadily.

"Are they ghosts?" Kali whispered.

Cesira shook her head. They are Quessilaren-nearly gone, but for small herds that dwell here and on distant Evermeet. The females run between this world and the Border Ethereal for protection, never belonging wholly to either.

"Are they dangerous?"

Not at all. They've befriended the wild elves and a handful of us. I and the other apprentices watch over them, when we can. Cesira held up her spear. When a buck is killed by the goblins, we burn the carcass, but for this. She let the spear point catch the moonlight. What Kail had at first taken for bells actually looked to be bits of hollowed-out antler.

The chimes they make are as sweet a music as any human will ever hear outside the elf courts, she said. Her expression hardened. We feel itfitting for the goblins to hear it before they die.

Kali said nothing, unsure how to react to the passion in the young girl's eyes. Lightning split the sky, turning her skin silver.

Come. Cesira said. We should move-

"Look out!" Kail dived at her, crushing his shoulder into the ditt as a hand axe sailed over their entwined bodies.

A lone goblin crashed through the trees after its wild throw. It saw them, helpless in the underbrush, and charged.

Kail rolled off the druid, scrambling to get his sword. He braced the blade as Cesira wrenched the creature's leg, sending it sprawling onto the sword's point. The goblin crumpled as Kail pulled the weapon free, and the pair ran, retreating deeper into the forest.

Wait. Panting, Cesira pulled Kail up short.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded curtly, but her eyes were wide. You should wipe the blood from your weapon, she said.

Kali looked down at his sword. A red stain ran halfway up the blade. He drew it across the grass.

I didn't see the axe, Cesira said.

"I know."

She scowled. That doesn't mean-

"I was just as scared," he interrupted, and they gazed at each other in silence. "I want to go back," Kail said. In his heart, he did not mean to Garavin's hut.

She seemed to realize it, and softened. You can't. That path is closed.

Her voice was gentle, but the words felt like a slap. Kail's anger returned. "You know nothing about me!" he snapped. / know much of you, Kail. "How do you know my name?"

Garavin, she said simply. Go back to him. Dig holes and make tunnels. It's hardening work, work you'll need. In a year or two you'll be fighting goblins. Dig holes, make tunnels... She paused. And come to see me, at the boulder.

"Why?" Kail asked, confused. In the dark and the mist her profile wasn't easy to discern, but he knew she was looking at him.

You helped me, she said. The words clearly came hard to her. I can help you.

They didn't speak again. She took him back to the boulder between the trees, so he would know how to find it again.

They found Morgan and Laerin leaning against the rock, arguing.

"If he'd've been some frock-heavy, perfumed Waterdhavian snotling, you wouldn't ve thought twice about keeping them!" Morgan accused.

"Yet clearly he's not," came Laerin's gentler reply. He noticed Kail and Cesira, and smiled. "Nor is he quite a boy, after what he's been through. Well met, Kail."

Kail nodded to the half-elf. Cesira climbed the boulder and sat cross-legged atop it.

You're both late, she said.

"Our fault completely," said Laerin. "We lost Kail's trail thanks to your superior forest skills… and Morgan dropped the emeralds."

"Found 'em again, didn't I!" Morgan huffed. He reached inside a pouch and pulled something out in his fist. He hurled the object-a small, dirt-encrusted bundle of linen-at Kali.

Kail recognized it at once. It was the same bundle he'd unearthed with his father's sword from the cemetery in Esmeltatan. One end was torn open. Kail could see twin points of green glittering against the white linen: two more emeralds- flawless stones matching the gem in his father's sword.

"You stole them?" he asked incredulously.

Don't let their doltish appearances fool you, said Cesira. These huts are well known-and wanted-burglars in the finer districts ofWaterdeep, Arabel, and gods know where else.

"Those baubles would have kept us comfortable for several winters," Morgan complained.

"He's right," Kail said, fingering the stones. He fought down his instinctive anger at Morgan's theft and instead looked at Laerin. "Why didn't you keep them?"

"Because you're going to need them," Laerin said. He nodded at Cesira. "They speak, much like your lady's stones."

Kail felt his neck grow warm, but he refused to be distracted by the half-elf s teasing. "Show me."

Laerin took one of the emeralds back, fisting it in the palm of his hand. "Morel," he said aloud. He waited a beat, then raised the stone to his mouth and spoke a handful of words in

Elvish. Kali did not understand any of them. A breath later, Kali looked down at his sword in surprise. The emerald in the hilt glowed, luminous against the platinum veins.

"Touch the stone in your sword and speak your family name," Laerin instructed him.

Curious, Kali did as he said and felt the emerald grow warm. He heard Laerin s Elvish speech coming

from the stone, a perfect echo of what the half-elf had said. An instant later, the words repeated, this time in Common.

Friends in the dark.

Kali lowered his weapon. "I had no idea the stones were linked."

"No matter the language, the gems will translate. They have another power," Laerin said. He dropped the second emerald in Kail's open hand. "Anyone who possesses one of the emeralds can locate the other two at any time, no matter the distance."

"Been tracking you since you left the hut," said Morgan.

"What does the message mean?" Kali asked, still watching the half-elf. "Friends in the dark?"

"Means diggers," Laerin said. He winked at Kali.

"Nothing wrong with digging," Morgan agreed.

Kail looked up at the boulder, but Cesira had gone.

"She's rejoined the druids," Laerin explained. "But she'll be back." He pushed off the rock. "We should go. Garavin will be waiting."

Kail held the sparkling emeralds in his hand. The forest was eerily quiet, tense and uncertain in the wake of the goblin battle. In the distance, fires still burned.

It would take a long time, Kail thought, but eventually the fotest would look as it had before. Maybe it would be stronger for all the damage it had suffered. Kail wondered if he would see the mist stags again.

Turning, he followed Morgan and Laerin back to Garavin's hut.

CHAPTER 8

Esmeltaran, Amn 2 EUint, the Year of the Banner (1368 DR)

Three years later, the house looked exactly as he remembered it.

Kali expected to meet the bulk of the resistance at the door, but there was only one guard, a skinny, tired-looking man who stood by the window, with a fist stuck in his mouth to stifle a yawn.

Kail slid around the side of the house, beneath the windows facing the front hedgerows. He came up behind the guard and clipped him on the back of the head with the pommel of his sword. The guard crumpled; Kail caught him under the armpits and dragged him into the shadows behind the bushes.

Returning to the door, he took out the set of lockpicks Laerin had given him and set to work. He hadn't nearly the half-elf s skill, but what he lacked in grace he made up for with persistence. The lock gave way with a click.

Inside the entry hall, lanterns were dimmed for sleep, but Kail knew his house well enough to feel his way. He listened for signs that someone had detected his presence, but he heard nothing.

One inept guard at the door and no stirring in the house-it was too easy for Kail's comfort. His father would never have permitted such a breach of his private space. A sinking unease filled Kail's chest.

He stepped forward, passing between two twisted columns. He heard the second click a heartbeat too late.

Kali ducked, on the off chance the trap was aimed at his head, but the danger came from below. Metal spikes burst from camouflaged gaps in the marble floor, ringing him in a field of razors. If he'd been standing directly on top of one of them, Kali was certain he'd have lost a foot. A spike caught him in the calf, shearing away his boot like so much meat off the bone.

Kail resisted the urge to jump back, lest he should trigger more of the deadly spikes. Regaining his balance, he began moving forward again, watching the floor for holes. He made it to the other side of the hall without encountering any further traps.

In the shadows beneath the main staircase, Kali paused to listen again. He'd never known his father kept such deadly traps in his own home. Dhairr had always feared assassins-Kail had grown up with nightmares from listening to his father's tales about shadowy, hidden foes-but this? It made his father seem a prisoner in his own home. What other secrets had Dhairr kept from him?

He pushed the thoughts away. He had to find Balram. Someone was sure to have heard the trap go off. He was running out of time.

The back wall by the staircase had only one door. It opened onto the garden between the main house and the towers. He could conceal himself better in the garden than the hall.

Kali listened at the door, hearing a faint scraping sound coming from the other side. He tested the lock, but it was open. Slowly, he eased the door inward a crack.

In the center of the garden, illuminated by faint moonglow, Dhairr Morel crouched in the fountain's dry basin, digging at a jagged crack with his sword. The blade was dull and notched from repeated scrapes across the stone. A shrill, metallic screech filled the air as he worked.

Kali simply watched his fathet, unable to believe the changes wrought in his visage. Flesh stretched taut beneath his eyes and along his jaw. His lips were colorless and bore ragged crevices and gaps where he'd bitten them too deeply. His hair was thin and coarse, like a wisp broom. It hung past his shoulders and dragged the fountain bowl when Dhairr bent his ear to the crack. His eyes fell on Kail and narrowed.

"Who are you?" he rasped. He flipped his blade up, menacing Kail with nothing more than a blunt edge. "Begone, assassin! You'll not have my family."

"Father," Kail said, taking a step forward. "Don't you recognize me? I am your family-Kail, your son."

"Kali," Dhairr repeated, testing the name on his tongue. Slow comprehension broke over his wasted face. "So you've returned. Kail the tiaitor-have you come back to finish what you started?"

"No, Father," Kail said. "I've come back to free you." "Lies!"

Dhairr lunged, aiming at Kail's midsection. For all the changes, his father was still fast, and Kail was so stunned by the outburst he almost allowed himself to be impaled upon Dhairr's notched blade. He backed away and tripped, landing awkwardly on his side on the walkway.

Dhairr smiled cruelly. "Don't be careless, Kail. You think I won't do to you what I did to Haig? That I'll show mercy because you're my son? You have no idea who I am, boy."

"You don't know what you're saying-" Kali dodged anothet swing. His fathet was still caught in the grip of Balram's spell; he still believed Kali had betrayed him. Kail arched his back, snapping his legs downward in a sharp thrust to get his feet undet him. The quick, acrobatic move made Dhairr back off a step, long enough for Kali to bring his sword up at a defensive slant.

"You would fight me with a Morel emerald?" Dhairr slapped

Kail's sword, revealing the matching gems borne by both blades-one steeped in magic, the othet caked with dirt. "You were never worthy of bearing that sword." Dhairr sprang again, slashing in and up, ttying to get under Kail's guard.

"Father, tell me where Balram is. He's the ttaitor." Kail caught the notched blade and twisted to pry the weapon from Dhairr's fingers. Obediently, Dhaitt abandoned the swotd and threw his fist instead, landing a blow hard above Kail's ear.

Dazed, Kail shuffled back. His father flipped his sword back into his hands with the toe of his boot. "You're going to lose if you don't fight in earnest. Think carefully, Kali. You either mean it or you die."

Kail shook his head to clear it. "I'm here to kill Balram, not you," he insisted.

"Balram is gone," Dhairr said. "He left me to face my assassins alone, but I'm more than able to weed the filth from my garden."

"Father, please." Kali blocked high and crosswise as Dhairr chopped downward mercilessly with both hands. The impact resonated along Kail's blade to the hilt. Kail was reminded anew of how strong the man could be. Sick as he was, his fathet was tight: Kail couldn't afford to fight the battle halfheartedly.

"You can resist Balram's control," Kail said. He took a step back and to the side, circling Dhairr, waiting for him to take another lunge. He did not. He seemed to be listening. "Balram may be gone, but his evil is still eating away at your soul. Can't you see?" It was a rhetorical question, for Kali immediately took the offensive, bringing his blade in high.

When Dhairr blocked, Kail grabbed his father by the back of the neck and dragged him in close, tangling their blades in a harmless lock. "I've come back to save you." Kail held his father's stubborn, glassy-eyed gaze with one of determination. Let him see. Let him know I'm telling the truth. Kali prayed he could get through.

He shoved his father back, metal raking metal as their swords came apart. Kali followed up with another slash in a broad arc. Dhairr blocked it easily but lost a step, giving Kail ground.

"You're going to be all right." Kail kept swinging and talking, never allowing Dhairr the chance to respond to or deny his words. Slowly, his father's anger gave way to uncertainty. Kail used the advantage, driving his fathet where Kali wanted him to go. When the backs of his knees struck the fountain's edge, Dhairr fell, his eyes widening in surprise and fear.

Kali ran forward, letting his sword drop to the walkway. He caught his father in his arms before Dhairr's head sttuck the stone basin. Kail kicked the dull blade out of reach.

Dhairr snuggled, but his son stubbornly held on, pinning his arms until the older man stopped fighting. When it was cleat he was no physical match for Kail, Dhairr began hurling curses: foul, hateful monologues-that Kali was not his son, that his mother was a godless, murdering whore, that he had no son... he had no son.

"Kali... Kali," he murmured finally, his voice hoarse. He focused on Kail's face, but there was no recognition. His head snapped from side to side. "Where is my son?" he whispered. "Where is he?"

Kail sat helplessly. For all his father's strength, the man seemed light as air in his arms. He looked small, and very, very old. Kali had no idea what to say to his father, how to answer the imploring look in

his eyes. He could only hold him as he slid into unconsciousness.

"You can't save him," said a soft, feminine voice.

Kail whirled, reaching for his sword, but the woman cradled it in her hands. She was almost as tall as he, with a shott bob of black hair capping a round face and green eyes.

"A fine blade," she said, watching Kail appraisingly. "I've no doubt he was wrong. You are worthy of wielding it."

"Who are you?" Kail asked, but he tecognized the symbol she wore. He'd seen it once before, in this same garden.

"Meisha Saira," the woman introduced herself. Of the Harpers, Kail added silently.

"You're here because of Haig," Kail said, lowering his father gently to the ground. He stood, measuring the woman's intent. He didn't like what he saw. The spread of her feet and the tension in her neck and shoulders gave her away. She was here for a fight.

"I owe you thanks. You've saved me the trouble of subduing his murderer." She looked down at his fathet with a mixture of disgust and pity. "Not that he appears to warrant great effort, in his cutrent state."

"You can't have him," Kali said steadily.

The woman lifted a brow. "Oh? Was his confession the ravings of a madman, then?"

"The man responsible for Haig's death is Balram Korttun," said Kail. "My father acted under Balram's influence, and as you can see, he is no longer a threat to anyone."

"He soon won't be," Meisha agreed. She cast his sword to the far end of the garden and raised her empty hands.

Kail got to her first. He grabbed her arm and twisted it, slamming her against his chest with her hand bent at a painful angle against het lower back. "You're not listening," he said in her ear. When she struggled, he wrenched her palm back until she gasped. "If you want justice for Haig, let my father live, and I will get it for you."

"He's no longer your father," Meisha argued. "He doesn't recognize his own son."

"I know," Kali said, swallowing his grief. "What is left of him suffers more than enough."

"Then why not end it? Give him a quick, merciful death."

"No." Kail shook his head. "I won't kill him if there's a chance he might come back."

Meisha fell silent. She relaxed her stance, but Kail kept her hand pinned. "You won't kill him," she said softly. "But are you willing to die to protect what he has become?"

She brought her heel up, clipping his knee. Pain shot up Kail's leg. He released her involuntarily.

Backing away, she flicked a wrist, fingers splayed, and traced a circular pattern with her other thumb in midair. She spoke as she cast. "Will it be your life for his?"

Her eyes blazed red, and Kail thought for an instant they were afire, burning the orbs out of their sockets. The circle she traced filled with flame, swirling in on itself to become a ball of brilliant orange with a blue vottex.

Kali had seen wizards cast spells in battle, and he'd even seen magical fire burn men alive. He'd once accompanied Cesira to the site of a massive spell duel between rival wizards. They'd watched from a protected distance, but after a time Kail's eyes could no longer separate one spell from anothet amid the devastation.

He'd never seen a fireball form in a wizard's hands at such close tange-shaped from nothing, a great embei falling from a god's furnace-never had he seen one directed at himself.

The flames filled his vision as the deadly orb flew toward him. He felt the heat seat his face. Instinctively, he threw up his hands and covered his father's body with his own.

He heard the explosion, but the pain didn't follow. Kali lifted his head and saw the twin, scorching trails marking the path the fiteballs had made across the garden. They formed a perfect arc around his and his father's bodies.

"You split them," Kail said, standing. His legs felt shaky. "Why?"

"Curiosity." She dismissed it with a shrug. "Or a test of yout convictions. Call it whatever you like, I-"

She tried to dodge, but Kali had her again. He pinned her arms down to her sides. "I appreciate the reprieve. This is just in case you have another of those fire spells ready," he said.

She smiled thinly. "What makes you think I need anothet?"

Kali felt his skin grow warm. Sweat broke out on his neck, and alarm rose in his chest. He looked down at the Harper. Her skin, pressed against his, was painfully hot.

"Let me go, Motel, or I will burn you," she said, her voice echoing with deadly powet. "All I want is your father."

Gazing into her eyes, Kail saw she told the truth. Slowly, he slid his other arm around her waist, steeling himself against the intense pain. "If you're willing to kill me for him, get it over with," he rasped.

For a breath, the heat wavered. Kali waited, but then, as suddenly as it had started, the burning sensation ebbed. The Harper stiffened, her eyes going wide.

Kail looked up and realized immediately what had cooled the fire. He nodded a stiff greeting to Motgan. The rogue had a stiletto point pressed against the back of Meisha's neck. "I seem to remember telling you I'd handle this on my own," he said, not bothering to hide his irritation.

"Doing a fine job of it too," Morgan snorted. " 'Sides, it was his idea."

Kail released Meisha and stepped back. He looked ovet Motgan's shoulder, expecting to see Laerin. His mouth fell open when Garavin entered the garden, flanked by Cesira and the half-elf. "You all followed me?"

"Not at first," Laerin said. He handed Kali back his blade as Garavin patted Meisha down for weapons.

Cesira knelt next to his father's unconscious body. We followed your sword, she said.

Laerin tossed an emerald to Kail, pretending to look abashed.

Kail sheathed his weapon, amazed but still angry at the deception. "You shouldn't have taken it... again."

"I shouldn't have," Laerin agreed. "But it was our only link to you. Morgan was distraught at the thought you might get into trouble without him."

"How fares yer father?" Garavin asked, speaking for the first time. He nodded at Meisha. "And what have we here?"

"Garavin Fallstone, meet Meisha Saira," Kail said. "She just tried to kill me."

"Probably won't be the last time," Morgan predicted.

The Harper remained silent, her eyes darting among the new arrivals. Kali went down on one knee

next to the druid, who was examining his father. "Can you break the enchantment?" he asked, addressing both Cesira and the dwarf.

Cesira shook her head. There's magic about him, but whatever the source, it's long spent. The marks it left on him can't be erased with more magic.

Garavin nodded agreement. "Take him back with us. We'll make him comfortable, and ye can stay with him, Kail."

Kail wiped the fever sweat from his father's brow. "No. I can't be there when he wakes up. Seeing me put him in this state. He believed I was trying to kill him."

You can't mean to leave him here, said Cesira. You've been waiting three years to save him.

"Balram's gone," said Kali. "My father is no longer in danger from him. He'll be as safe here as anywhere else."

"And yerself? What will ye do?" asked Garavin.

Lost in thought, Kail stared down at his father's face. He remembered the violence in Dhaitr's eyes during their sword fight. "I'll go back with you," he decided. "Gods willing, when my father wakes up, he won't remember any of this. He'll go on as before, when I wasn't here."

"How?" asked Laerin. He took in the damaged fountain, and the garden showing further signs of neglect. "The house mirrors your fathet's condition.

"How long will Morel be able to sutvive lying vulnerable among the merchants of Amn?"

"Longer than he will if I remain," Kali said. "I'll come back after, to salvage what I can."

"After?" Morgan asked, but surprisingly, it was Meisha who answered.

"After he dies," she said quietly, wincing when Morgan tightened his grip on the stiletto.

Kail nodded. "When that happens, all that is Morel will pass to me. I can rebuild from its ashes." He regarded Meisha warily. "But only if I know my father will not go prematurely to the grave. Will your death be my only guarantee of that, Meisha Saira?"

"If the lass ttacked down your father, she might be able to aid ye in tracking Balram," said Garavin. "Might be a shame to be killing her."

But can she be trusted? Cesira asked.

"I can speak for myself," said Meisha sharply. She stared at Garavin, at the symbol around his neck. Kali couldn't imagine how, with a blade at the back of her neck and enemies boxing her in, she could focus on the object so completely.

"If I help you, you'll see that Balram pays for his crime?" Meisha asked, her eyes finally moving from the pendant to Kail's face.

"Whether you help or not, Balram will die by my hand," said Kali. "I promise you."

"Then Dhairr Morel is safe from me," said Meisha. "You have my word."

"We'll be watching to see you hold to it," said Morgan. He took his blade from the back of her neck.

Dhairr stiired, murmuring in his sleep. Kali backed away. "It's time to go," he said, but he lingered in the garden with his father until the others had gone. He put his father's dull blade next to him by the fountain, so he would find it when he woke.

"Forgive me," he whispered as Dhairr twitched in the throes of some agitated dream. "I failed you, but I won't fail our family. I'll come back. I'll restore everything Balram took away and send him to the Nine Hells for what he did to you."

"My son," his father murmured. Kali froze, but Dhairr's eyes remained shut. His struggles slowed, and he slept on, peacefully.

Kail turned away, and saw Cesira silhouetted in the doorway to the gatden. She said nothing when he moved to join her, and neither looked back as they walked from the house.

Tossing in feverish dreams, Meisha curled unconsciously closer to her campfire. She needed the warmth. She was back in the cold, back in the Delve. Was it calling the fire that had triggered the dream? No, Kail's friend, the dwarf, had done it.

The dream always started the same way-as memory. She could recall every detail with perfect clarity.

The child Meisha huddled in a sullen hall on the floor of the cavern. She stared into the firepit, feeling only a vague sense of unease she could not explain. She'd felt it ever since Varan had brought her to the Delve. It had been three days, but she already felt she'd spent a lifetime out of the sun.

"Areyou so determined to be angry with me?"

Varan's voice echoed from the tunnel, but Meisha did not turn to face her teacher. Flames beat down on her shaved skull; heat from the fire made the mud covering her chest crack and crumble. The heat reminded her ofhighsun in Keczulla, during the markets. The mud had protected her skin from the burning sun, but she didn't need it now-in the dark. She missed Amn, missed the smell and color of the crowds. The Delve seemed unnaturally quiet. Varan preferred it that way.

"Do you imagine, in allFaertin, you are the only child ever to have been deprived of something-a home, loved ones, a dream?"

Varan sat across the pitfrom her, his robes pillowed beneath him on the cold cavern floor. Their hem still dripped wet from the water whip spell she'd used on him. "Though you've been blessed with none of those things, Meisha, you have a great gift slumbering within you. Iam offeringyou a home-food and shelter, education, and power. What child would deny such a dream? "

Meisha met his eyes across the pit. Flames surged up between them, the fire reaching the ceiling.

Varan never flinched, though the girl swore his beard was singed.

When the fire shrank away, the wizard sighed. "Very well, I concede the battle. Jonal will study water. Fire shall be your element. I cannot deny that flames match your nature. Fire's inherent power will help you survive, until you embrace it for the right reasons."

"What reason is there for hurling flame, except to kill things?" The little girl sneered.

"When you've completed your studies, you will have the answer to that question, "said Varan.

"And when I've finished, you'll let me go?" Meisha asked, watching him closely.

"Of course. You are not a prisoner here. The apprentices walk around as they please. You may do the same, but there are rules," he cautioned her. "You're not a Wraith anymore. You will wash the mudfrom your body and let your hair grow in, though perhaps you'll wear it short"-he rubbed his bearded chin as he regarded her-"to keep it from being singed. Yes, I think that will do. The Delve is my home as well as my fortress, and the caverns are secure, within the confines I've mapped. For your own safety, I ask you not to venture past my wards into the outer caves."

"What's out there?"

"Things you're not ready to see, little firebird," he said.

Meisha bristled at the childish nickname. "I can take care of myself." She looked away and caught movement from the mouth of one of the tunnels.

A small figure stood watching them-a dwarf in dented plate armor holding a large battle-axe. The handle of the weapon was broken, rendering it useless, but the dwarf clutched the remaining piece as if his life depended upon it.

"Varan- " but as soon as Meisha spoke, the dwarf vanished.

Varan smiled. "Didyou see something?"

Meisha kept her eyes on the tunnel, but the apparition did not reappear. "Who is he?"she asked, her voice hushed.

"You'veseen him before?"

"He watches me," said Meisha. She suppressed a shudder. "I didn't know he was... that he wasn't..."

"Alive? " Varan supplied. "I believe he is one of the Howlings." "Howlings?"

"This place was called the Howling Delve, longago. TheHowlings were dwarves-adventurers who made these caves a secret home. They rode on the backs of giant wolves and amassed quite a fortune beneath the earth, or so the dwarven olorns-magic stories-tell."

"What happened to them? "Meisha asked.

"Obviously, they died," said Varan, with a careless shrug, "as adventurers often do."

"Then why are they still here?" The sense of unease tucked around Meisha like an ill-fitting cloak. How could Varan live amongghosts?

"They are only echoes of the past, child, "said Varan, "Lingering memories and nothing to fear. My magic can create similar effects."

"How?" Meisha asked curiously. "Wouldyou like to see? To learn?"

Meisha heard the challenge in the question. She nodded slowly.

Varan reached into a small sack tied around his neck. "You'll see these again when we begin your testing," he said, pulling forth a small, square crystal. "They help me to gauge your progress." He touched one clear surface, spoke a word, and suddenly there were two more figures in the room. The man and child were perfect doubles of Varan and Meisha.

Meisha stared as her mirror image raised a hand and brought it down in a chopping motion. A jet of water rose from the ground and slapped the image of Varan, soaking his robes. The real Varan chuckled and spoke another command. The images shrank and returned to the crystal.

Meisha looked at her teacher. "How long can you keep the memories?"

"As long as I wish," Varan said. "Though perhaps I might erase that one, if you'd care to begin anew? "

Meisha stayed silent, so Varan continued, "I don't expect you to trust me yet, but you can trust this: I am a selfish old man, too curious about magic for my own good. I like to experiment, and I know the value in rearing a fire elementalist, a true savant. You may have a home here as long as you wish, no matter how many hurts you attempt to inflict upon me. I will not send you away. When your training is done, you may go back into the sunlight, if that is what you want." He removed another object from his sack, a small ring, which he handed to her. "When you leave, should you ever wish to return, all you need do is speak the command word on the band. The ring will bring you to the Delve." He leaned closer, so close to the pit she wondered how he stood the heat. "What say you, firebird?" He stretched his bare hand over the flames and met her gaze in another challenge.

Without hesitation, Meisha reached across and touched his wrinkled palm. Pain scalded her arm, but if he wouldn't back down, neither would she.

Varan's eyes shone with approval. "There will always be flame in you, child, for the whole of your life. But it will not always hurt so. Trust me."

Meisha nodded, bearing the pain. She looked over Varan's shoulder and saw the ghost again, watching her from the tunnel mouth. A large pendant hung around his neck with the figure of a mountain inscribed upon its surface. A hole sat in the center where once a charm or gem might have nestled.

What do you want from me? Meisha wondered. If the dwarf was beyond pain, why did he look so afraid?

As if in answer, the memories faded. The child Meisha had gone, and the sleeping Meisha found herself in a place she'd never been in her waking life. Only in her dreams had she been trapped in the stone chamber.

Meisha felt the surge of the campfire in time with her accelerating heartbeat. She knew what was coming, but she didn't want to face it.

This time, the fire was no friend. It held a living presence, awesome and terrifying and buried deep in a stone prison.

The presence, if it possessed a name, never spoke it to her. As far as Meisha was concerned, the creature was the Delve, and the Delve him. No further identity was needed.

She never saw a face, but she couldfeel the fire emanatingfrom the creature's body-a beast of fire and claws, claws that tested the walls of his prison and the ring of guards on silent vigil.

The dwarves-his keepers. Meisha sensed the beast desired to hunt, but the dwarves kept him sealed inside the cavernous prison. So instead, he hunted them all down, one by one in the vastness. Their screams echoed offthe stone as each one fell to thefire-clawed menace. They were still here, trapped alongside him for eternity.

He could slay them again, over and over, but Meisha sensed him growing weary of killing ghosts.

With renewed fear, Meisha thought, he wants to hear living screams.

But the fire beast was patient. His time would come. He could feel it. Until then…

"No!" the sleeping Meisha cried out. She watched helplessly through the eyes of the fire beast. He stalked forward and immediately met one of the dwarves. The smallfigure raised his broken axe in defiance. His pendant flashed briefly, brilliant silver, but the beast flexed his claws and ripped the broken weapon out ofthe dwarf's hands.

Screaming, Meisha sat up in her bedroll. The campfire flared in one giant stalk that reached almost to the tops of the trees.

Meisha swept an arm out, panting. The flames died, becoming so much smoking wood.

I'd been doing so well; I hadn't had the dream in months, Meisha thought bitterly.

Just when she thought she might be free of the Delve and her mastet, the memories came surging back like the fire-memories mixing with strange visions. How could she recognize ttuth from fever dreams?

There was one way, but Meisha would never take it. Her master might be able to explain the dteam. She'd never had it before coming to the Delve. The Delve and her master were inextricably linked.

She would never face either of them again.

CHAPTER 9

The Howling Delve 1 Kythorn, the Year of the Worm (1356DR) Twelve Years Ago…

When Meisha rolled over in the darkness, she knew she wasn't alone. Lying perfectly still, her eyes tracked every shadow in the small room, seeking a hidden foe.

Her gaze fell on the open chamber door. Meisha knew she'd closed it tightly before going to sleep.

She leaned forward, toward the crack of light filtering through the gap between the door and its roughly worked frame.

In the passage beyond, the dwarf stood quietly watching.

Icy needles ctawled up Meisha's back. Every night, she saw him-sometimes passing het in the narrow halls, sometimes in her room, standing at the foot of her small cot.

"What do you want!" she cried, raking her hands through het shott hair. "Speak, or leave me be!"

But the ghostly appatition had already vanished. Meisha dropped her head into her hands, fighting the urge to run from the room. She fought the same internal battle evety night. She longed to run to the wizard, to demand he return her to

Keczulla, or Waterdeep, or to the frozen North for all she cared. Anywhere that was not the Delve, where she felt buried alive.

A knock at the door made Meisha jump.

Shaera, apprentice of air and one of Varan's older students, came into the room. She cradled a candle in one hand. "Did you call me?" she asked.

"No," Meisha said, her customary sullen gaze snapping into place. "Why would I want you?"

"Why, indeed?" the girl murmured. She walked right past Meisha, ignoring her hissed curses. "I came to leave you this." She crouched next to the cot and spoke a soft, breathy word.

A small column of fire rose up from the floor, floating in midair as if suspended from an invisible wick.

"Just until you learn the spell yourself," Shaera explained. "Always carry a light down here. If nothing else, light frightens the rats away." She smiled encouragingly. "You'll grow used to the Delve. We'll help you."

"You think I need your help to make fire," Meisha said cuttingly. Her eyes rounded, and the flame soared higher, almost touching Shaera's belt.

The girl's smile didn't falter. "He said you were powerful. I'm impressed. But can you make the fire last the whole of the night?"

Colot rose in Meisha's cheeks, matching the slow-burning flame. She said nothing.

"I thought not." Shaera paused at the door. "If you get seated again, you can sleep in my room."

"Get out!" Meisha yelled, mortified that the girl had heard her distress. "Leave me alone!"

Shaera nodded and closed the door behind her.

Meisha seethed. Never on her worst night in Keczulla had she cried out, not when she'd been beaten by the Wraiths for holding back food, not when she'd been starving because they'd denied het for a tenday afterward. Through it all, she'd never made a sound.

How dare she, Meisha thought, how dare she come into her room uninvited? What would Varan think of such an invasion of privacy?

She snorted. Varan had probably sent the girl.

"Maybe you'd like the favor returned," she muttered. Her fear pushed aside by anger, Meisha slammed her door and headed for Varan's chambers.

She listened at the doors to each of the apprentices' rooms: Jonal, the watet student; Prieces, the earth apprentice. Shaera and Lima were both air, and shared a room across the passage. Meisha had never bothered to learn beyond theii names and elements.

Each room was quiet, the occupants undisturbed by her earlier shouts.

Did none of them feel the unnatutalness of the Delve? Meisha wondered. Or had they been in the place too long? All the apprentices here were at least two years older than Meisha and more advanced in their training. Perhaps they had grown used to the underground setting.

The thought of ever growing accustomed to life without sunlight made Meisha's skin go cold. She rubbed her hands up and down her arms.

That would never happen to her, she swore. She would always crave the Morninglord's touch.

When she came to Varan's door, she hesitated. A thin, green beam of light limned the crooked wooden planks. Enspelled globes, she thought. Varan used them in place of torches to light various parts of the Delve.

She reached up to rap on the wood and felt a tingle of electricity face down her arm: strong magic-dangerous, if she disturbed Varan in the middle of a casting.

The spell glow died away. Varan's muffled voice came through the wood.

"Come in, Meisha."

Scowling, Meisha dragged open the door to the chamber Varan used as a workroom. Her mouth fell open. "Close the door, please," the wizard said crisply.

Meisha shut the door and tutned a slow circle in the chamber, the better fot her eyes to take in the

writing scribbled on every wall's surface.

She could decipher only a handful of the arcane phrases. Inscribed and illuminated with green light, the writing blurred her vision if she stared at it too long. As if that were not disconcerting enough, Meisha swore she saw the writing move, tearranging itself as she tried to read.

"You couldn't sleep?" Varan inquired, when Meisha continued to gape at the wall of powet.

She shook het head. "What is all this?" she breathed, her earlier anger forgotten.

"Some of we poot practitioners still have to rely on spellbooks -the written word-to fuel our Art," Varan explained, "especially when we create new magic."

"Do you often?" Meisha asked. "Create new magic?"

"As often as I am able," Varan replied. "Creation, as I see it, should be the ultimate goal of all who study the Ait. That and teaching apprentices are the only ways our magic truly lives on. It matters not if the magic is used for protection ot destruction, as long as it exists and can be turned and forged into something new."

"And you think I will be your destructive force," Meisha said, turning at last to regard the wizard.

"I've decided to reserve judgment in your case," he hedged, "as you so often surprise me. But I do not think I will be disappointed, whichever path you choose to take."

He waved a hand, and the light faded from the writing. "So you'te having trouble sleeping," he mused. "It may be my stirrings of the Art woke you. In such a confined space, the magic has few places to go. The Delve is old, and the walls are worn with the imprints of old magic and the tread of feet- human and otherwise."

"Why do you live here then?" Meisha asked. With no chair in the room, she settled on the cold floor. "If the Delve is so old, aren't you afraid one day it will collapse?"

Varan chuckled. "From what I've been able to discern, the Delve has withstood far more than an old wizard's spells and come out intact. Now it is my sanctuary. The walls will hold." The wizard shrugged into a thick robe and plucked up a crooked staff as he spoke. "But we haven't solved your problem; you need sleep."

He ushered her out into the hall, spell-locking the door behind them. "When I can't find calm, I work until I'm weary, and I still have a task to finish before I seek my bed tonight. This task will weary both of us, if you'd cate to join me?"

Meisha nodded eagetly. Anything would be pteferable to tetutning to her boxlike room in the dark, even with the flame burning all night. The weight of the Delve still pressed down on her, but in Vatan's presence the feeling seemed to diminish.

She followed the wizard down a side passage typically forbidden to the apprentices. Meisha recognized the boundary of Varan's wards inscribed

on the tunnel wall. They walked right past the sigil, led by the glow from Varan's staff.

They entered a wide-mouthed, bell-shaped chamber that Meisha saw was entirely submerged in water. The cavern's ceiling reflected unbroken across the clear surface of the water, making it impossible to tell where the bottom lay.

Varan released his staff, causing it to hover over the center of the calm pool. "Fresh water source," he said. "Something we're always in need of down here. Close, too, so I'm considering extending the watds."

"So other creatures won't intrude on the watering hole," Meisha surmised.

"Correct-ordinarily-but I've observed this particular watering hole is rarely used by wandering creatures," Varan told her. "Can you guess why?"

Meisha looked at him shatply, at the same time taking a step back. "What dwells in the water?"

"Very good," Varan said, "and to answer your question, something big."

"So I'm to be your bait?" Meisha asked sullenly. She'd thought Varan would let her attack the thing.

Varan laughed. "Hardly, little one. I am not an ogte, or a Red Wizard, with apprentices to squander-and a waste it would be, for the creature that lives beneath the surface would rend you unrecognizable. Besides," his eyes glinted, "I do not require bait."

"How, then?" Meisha asked, intrigued. The wizard s enthusiasm infected her. She trailed his steps around the rim of the pool.

"First, I'll need your aid." Varan twirled a finger, and his staff inverted, shining the light close to the watet's surface. "For all its might, the creature is shy and comes to ground only to hunt. It will need an inducement to reveal itself."

He waited, and Meisha realized he proposed a test. Varan wanted to see how she would solve the problem.

Meisha squatted next to the pool and placed her hands above the water. The words came to her haltingly. She envisioned the words dredged up from the bottom of the pool like so many butied coins, humming with powet and warmth. She spoke fastet, and the powet turned to heat. She felt the glaze of it along her palm, a blown-glass ball she shaped using only her mind.

A bubble popped on the pool's surface. Next to her, a small, blind fish with twisted horns floated to the surface on its side. Another followed, and still Meisha let the heat build. Her calves ached from holding the same crouched position, but she dared not move or risk breaking the spell. Steam brushed her face. She heard another loud pop, and the water churned. Meisha thought it was the spell, but suddenly a fleshy mouth broke the sutface of the water, followed by twin webbed claws.

Meisha threw up her hand in automatic defense, realizing she might lose the appendage in her

foolishness. Spiky teeth closed around her wrist, but Meisha felt no pressure, no severing of bone or tissue.

With a hissing cry of pain, the creature released her and thrust back, churning water in its wake.

Meisha realized her hand was smoking. She'd burned the creature with her touch.

Varan stepped in front of her when the creature came around to attack again. Filmy eyes dominated the ripples of flesh that made up the creature's head. Below them, the mouth gaped from a nest of four tentacles. The creature's body tapered from a humanoid trunk to that of a serpent or an eel. Meisha couldn't tell from above the water.

Varan's hands traced the air in a scythe-cut. Slashes of light streaked across the chamber, cutting into the monster's flesh. Black ichor shed into the still-boiling pool.

Meisha crawled to a safe corner to watch the grim spectacle play out. She had no doubt Varan would win the battle. He stood so confidently; Meisha wondered if he'd ever lost a duel, with a creature or anothet wizatd. The power he expended seemed immense. Her own spell had drained her completely. The heat she'd created in the chamber, blending with the flashing light, mesmerized Meisha. Her last sight of the mysterious creature was bathed in that light, sharp against the black blood. Her vision dimmed, and she passed out.

When she awoke, Varan knelt beside her, supporting her head. His hard expression softened when he saw

her eyes open and aware.

"I feared you would not wake," he said.

"And you would have wasted an apprentice after all," Meisha said faintly.

Vatan did not smile at her jest. Gently, he helped her sit up and gave her a long draught from his watetskin.

"You passed every test but one," he said, after she'd collected hetself.

Meisha waited expectantly, and Vatan nodded towatd the pool, which still gave off clouds of steam. The black blood and the creature were gone.

"You tapped too deeply into the fire," he said, "The power overwhelmed you, yes?"

Meisha nodded, for once listening without comment ot judgment. Varan was right. She'd felt a depth to the magic, a power just out of reach. She thought if she'd stretched a little bit farther, she might have brushed its source.

'When you're ready, we'll explore how deep the fire goes," Varan promised. "Be patient a few years. If you act too soon, the power may burn you from within, or deteriorate your health, as it has mine."

Meisha looked at hinj in surprise. She hadn't expected Varan to admit any weaknesses to het. Was it a gesture of ttust?

"What was the creature?" she asked, glancing at the water. "Will thete be more?"

"I think not," Varan said. "It was a kopru, a sea creature, adapted somehow to the fresh water. He was aged, else he would have been more difficult to kill, I think."

Difficult enough, Meisha thought, as weakness gripped her again. She swayed; Varan steadied her and squeezed her shoulder.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

He was concerned, Meisha thought, and marveled at the notion. No one had ever expressed concern for her before, and now it had happened twice in one night.

"I'm tired," she said, admitting her own weakness.

Varan nodded. "You'll sleep deeply tonight," he said, "and tomorrow."

"But our lesson-"

"Will keep," he said firmly. "I'm spending the next few days in another part of the Delve. You can use that time to recover."

"What part?" Meisha asked, curious. She had only a vague pictute in her mind of the layout of the Delve. The upper chambers were laid out roughly in the shape of a spider, with the apptentices living and studying in the main body, protected by Varan's wards from the tunnels branching out on all sides.

Far below them, the testing chambets were arranged and connected like star points. Vatan had designed them personally as training grounds for his apprentices. Meisha knew of no other large cavern systems within the Delve.

"Is the way hidden?" she asked.

"Quite well hidden," Vatan said, "and magically sealed. I managed to unravel the spells and for my efforts discovered a set of caverns adjoining the testing chambeis. In all my years here, I never knew of their existence. They will take several tendays, perhaps longer, to explore fully. I am hoping they will contain something of value to make the effort worthwhile."

"Show me," Meisha pleaded. She didn't like the prospect of spending several nights alone in her room, with only the other apprentices for company. "I could go with you, aid you."

"You could, and I'd be glad of a watm fire, so deep in the earth, but you need to rest. When you've regained your strength, I'll show you the way in, and I'll be glad of your aid."

He touched her shoulder, and Meisha, weary but flush with her small victoty in the Art, forgot to push him away.

Varan's prediction held true. Meisha slept all through the next day and night, rising only to take small meals. Gradually, her energy returned and with it the brush of power, just out of her reach. She left it alone, as Varan had instructed, but she was eager, fot the first time, to tell her teacher what she felt.

When she knocked on his door the third day, there came no answer, nor was there on the fourth or fifth. Meisha returned eveiy night, and during the day, when their watet supply ran" low, she collected bucketfuls from the newly vacant pool.

After a tenday, they began to worry, not just for Varan's safety, but fot their own continued survival. None of them knew how to get to the surface without Vatan's magic, and they were quickly running out of food.

Meisha and Prieces ventured out into the Delve seeking fresh meat, while Shaera and the test returned to the training tunnels to search for the wizard and the secret cavern enttance.

When Meisha returned to her chamber, empty-handed and hungry, she saw the green light coming from Varan's workroom.

Running to the door, she felt the same burst of electrical heat, but this time she ignored it and tried to force the door. The spell lock sizzled along her fingers, hot but not burning. The door was sealed tight.

"Master!" she shouted, pounding on the door. "Are you in there?"

She heard glass breaking and what sounded like Varan's workbench being dragged across the floor. The wizard's voice rang out above the din.

"I'm all right, firebird," he called. "Go back to yout room."

"Where have you been?" she persisted, banging harder on the door. "We've been searching the tunnels for you. The food is almost gone."

"I apologize for that, little one, and I've corrected the oversight. You'll find the larder filled, and the next time I leave, you will not be left without provisions."

"The next time?" Meisha cried. "We thought you dead; now you're leaving again? Varan, open the door!"

"Calm yourself," Varan said soothingly. "We will continue your lessons as I promised. I will not be leaving for some time. The objects I brought back will occupy all of my attention for a while."

"What are they?" Meisha asked. "What did you find?" "Amazing things," Vatan said excitedly. His voice drifted away from the door, and she heard more objects being moved around the room.

"Varan," she called. "Varan!"

Light flared through the door, blinding her. When her vision cleared, Meisha heard nothing mote from the room. She sensed, without knowing how, that Varan had gone.

She slumped to the floor, wondering what it all meant. Her stomach growled loudly, and Meisha recalled their most ptessing need. She headed to the larder, hoping that Varan had indeed stocked it well.

Perhaps, when Varan had sorted out whatever it was he'd found in the caverns, he would show her

where he'd been.

CHAPTER 10

The Howling Delve 11 Uktar, the Year of the Serpent (1359 DR)

She's run off!" Jonal cried. Meisha opened her eyes, her meditation ruined. Annoyed, she turned to glare at the watet apprentice. "What?"

"Shaera," Jonal said. "She's gone beyond the wards, seeking the master's tunnels. She wants to know where he goes."

"Don't we all," Meisha muttered. She began pulling on her boots. "Does Varan know?"

Jonal shook his head. "He hasn't come out-" "Of the workroom," Meisha finished disgustedly. In the three years since finding the secret tunnels, Varan had squirreled away an unknown number of treasures. He barely left his chambeis anymore, for toying with them. "Peihaps it's time to remind him of his responsibilities... again."

"But you can't," Jonal sputtered. "If he's in the middle of an experiment, you could be killed."

"We're out of food again," Meisha snapped. "The north wards failed last night, letting in two deep bats and gods know what else we haven't seen. All the while Varan's been tucked away in his nest. It's time someone shook the branches."

The workroom was lit and locked again, but Meisha was three years older, and Varan had grown careless

with his simple magics.

She grabbed the door latch and summoned fire to her hand. Wood disintegrated into black charring, and she dropped the searing latch to the ground.

Meisha burst into Varan's chamber, and immediately saw the glowing circle centered on the wizard's worktable.

Varan stood with his back to her, his attention on an object hovering above the table.

"I'll ask you to tepair that door at your earliest convenience, Meisha," he said testily. He moved his hands over the object: a glove that appeared to be made of liquid metal, a shimmering waterfall of steel. "I've grown accustomed to your late night poundings on my door; but what brings you so suddenly and so violently into my room? Risking your own life in the process, I might add."

"Shaera's gone missing," Meisha said. "Jonal says she went beyond the watds."

"Gone exploring, I expect." Varan still hadn't turned around. His shoulders drooped as if he carried sacks of stone, but he maintained the swirling pattern of magic around the glove. "Does Jonal know where?"

"The Climb," Meisha said uncertainly. "I didn't know what he meant."

"You wouldn't," said Varan, "because I have not gotten around to showing the passage to you ot warning you that to attempt it is beyond stupidity.

Shaera, if she turns up injured, will have taken care of both tasks quite capably."

Meisha, her jaw clenched, stated hatefully at the wizard's back. She fought the temptation to shove him into the bright sphere of his Art. Anything to get his attention for one breath, even if it turned out to be her last on Toril.

"Don't you care?" she spat. "If nothing else, she is air. Your training will have gone to waste if she dies!"

Varan made a gesture, and the floating miasma froze in place. Slowly, the orange glow of torchlight replaced the magical light in the room. He turned to face her.

Meisha flinched involuntarily at the haggardness of his face. Gray hairs shed from his beard to litter the front of his robes. Meisha did not know if stress or the force of his Art had caused them to fall out. The magic seemed to be taking him a piece at a time.

May any watching gods smite me if I come to this, Meisha thought. She found herself unable to feel a shied of pity fot her master. She was too angry.

For his part, Varan did not seem to notice her fury. "Did you come here to ask for my help, or my permission to go aftet Shaera?" he asked. He leaned against the table for support. "In either event, I'm surprised at your outburst. You've never shown any inclination of friendship to Shaera or the other apprentices. In fact, you consider yourself superior to all of them."

"Because I am."

"I won't dispute you. But I do warn you: be cautious wheie you aim yout righteous anger, little firebird."

"I don't have time for this," Meisha snarled. "If you won't help me, tell me what the Climb is."

"As you wish."

He told her.

"The Climb," Meisha chuckled bitteily. She regarded the round rat hole in the wall and the impenetrable darkness within. "More like a long fall."

Varan said hands other than his had tunneled the hole out of the stone. Meisha wondered briefly if those hands had been a dwarf s, and if one of them had carried a broken battle-axe. Varan's mark hung on the wall above the hole, warning the apprentices away.

Jonal stood hesitantly at her elbow. "Do you think it's true?" he asked in hushed tones, as if the wizard might overhear. "Do you believe the tunnel goes all the way down to the testing chambers?"

"And beyond-so he claims," Meisha said stiffly. She didn't know what to believe. She had no idea how far down the testing chambers lay. Varan had always teleported them between the spider and the star, with no indication of the distance traversed. If Shaera expected to find the entrance to Varan's hidden tunnels using the Climb, Meisha hoped she'd prepared for a long journey.

"He hasn't come out of the room?" she asked, though she already knew the answer.

"No," Jonal said. "He hasn't spoken to anyone since you entered his chamber. Will he come out," Jonal asked, "to aid in the search?"

"He will not," Meisha said, "until his experiment is complete. He claims that releasing the magic prematurely could.endanger us all."

"Will you wait for him?" Jonal asked hopefully.

Meisha turned a stony gaze on him. The apprentice ducked his head.

"I suppose if I don't return, he'll inquire about our fates eventually," Meisha said, her voice rich with scorn. "Wait for me on this side," she told Jonal, "and do not follow."

Meisha knew her warning was unnecessary. In his heart, Jonal was a coward. He would never enter the dark passage to come after either of them. She saw it in his eyes.

She moved to the tunnel mouth and heaved herself up onto its stone lip. Speaking a word, Meisha blew on her outstretched palm. Her fingers began to glow. The orange light spread down her palm to her wrist. Varan had taught iter the spell for light; the variation was her own.

By the glow of her palm she saw the tunnel stretching ahead of her in a narrow tube, and above her in a slender shaft. If Shaeta was ttying to find the testing chambets, she would have certainly gone forward. Meisha would have to follow, crawling on her belly for gods knew how many feet, and pray that at some point the path widened. She knew it

would have to dip down. Far down, if the tales were accurate. And if she were attacked, it would be nearly impossible to mount a defense with spells.

"Lovely," she murmured, and she began to ciawl.

Waiting, his claws tense, the fire beast felt the magic coursing through the Delve. He willed it to falter and rage out of control, to shake the caverns and tear his prison apart-it would only take a single misguided stroke of power, and the dwarves' ancient bonds would crumble.

How fragile the stmctuies of mortals were. The beast's fire, his very presence, only served to corrupt the integrity of the Delve futther-a consequence of his imprisonment that never ceased to delight him. By the time he won free, the entire stronghold would be suffused with his essence. His hunting ground would be complete, a place of nightmares that merely awaited prey. The beast relished the thought.

Content in his future, the beast settled back into the life and waited for the dwatves to be reborn into their ghostly existence; so he could hunt again. He did not mind honing his skills.

CHAPTER 11

The Howling Delve 12 Uktar, the Year of the Serpent (1359 DR)

Meisha thrust herself forward another foot. Her stomach felt raw through her coarse linen shirt. Sweat poured down her face, dripping salt in her eyes, but she kept ctawling. The physical discomfotts kept het mind occupied. She would endure almost anything to keep the memory of the dream at bay.

The beast of fire and claws. Every time she had the dream, the presence was there, stalking the helpless dwarves. She watched them die over and over again.

Ten more feet, Meisha counted in her head. The stone chilled her flesh, making her lightheaded and feverish.

She pressed her face against the ground. The taste of rock and dirt and something foreign filled her mouth.

A wave of nausea hit het gut. Meisha turned her head to one side and gagged, spitting to clear her mouth of a taste worse than bile. Instinctively, she tried to curl up in a ball, but the tunnel bound her in the shape of a worm.

Meisha forced herself to breathe deeply, to push away the tight fear in her chest.

"You've slept on stone every night for the past four years," she said aloud, just to hear the sound of her voice. "This should not disturb you now."

Perhaps it was because she found herself so far from Varan's circle of protection. She'd always felt more at ease in the wizard's presence. Possibly his magic in some way mitigated the oppressiveness of the Delve.

Not enough, Meisha thought. She ached for the sunlight and the heat, almost as much as she craved the fire inside herself, the power of it. Living in a deep hole in the ground had never stopped feeling unnatural to her.

Was the presence in her dream merely a manifestation of that wrongness?

No, it was more than that, Meisha knew. There was something wrong with the Delve, something Varan chose to deny or ignore. She didn't know which state of mind was the more foolish.

Pushing herself back up to her elbows, Meisha began dragging herself forward again.

Ahead of her, a rock outcrop burst into soft glow. Before she could react, a cold hand closed around her ankle.

A scream ripped from Meisha's throat. The sound echoed down the tunnel. Power flared involuntarily in her mind.

She flipped to her back and splayed her fingertips. Fire rolled down her body, an inch-thick gout of

flame that lit up the passage.

When the flames died, the glow had gone, and the only sound was Meisha's ragged breathing. The passage sat empty behind her.

"Show yourself!" Meisha shouted.

The answering silence mocked her. Meisha threw her hands up against the curved stone ceiling, emptying her fear and the fire into the tock. Orange clouds of flame licked along the tunnel in eithet direction until her anger spent itself.

When the flames grew cold, she regarded the blackened stone above her. Meisha felt some small satisfaction knowing she could leave a mark on the Delve's impenetrable armor.

Reigniting her light source, Meisha squinted into the distance ahead of het, and saw that the tunnel dropped off sharply ten feet ahead of her. She hadn't seen the precipice earlier.

She crawled to the edge and saw a steep, angled drop of roughly fifteen feet. Crawling blindly, she might have fallen over the edge and broken her neck.

Cold sweat pricked her scalp. Meisha closed her eyes and pictured a dwarPs face, for she had no other explanation for her mysterious rescue.

"My thanks," she whispeted.

She still had to navigate the steep drop. Feet first, the fall might have been manageable, but Meisha

had no way to reverse her position in the tiny space. Shaera, an air savant, would have bypassed the drop easily. Meisha knew few such spells, but would have to learn more, she thought. She'd never trusted magic that did not involve fire. Flame felt natural to het-rendering her body light enough to float down a fifteen-foot drop, did not.

Calling the little-used words to het mind, Meisha cast the spell. Outwardly, she felt no change, but she could sense the release of magic from her spirit, and knew the spell had worked. Still, as she shimmied to the edge of the drop, she felt a hint of trepidation.

She gtasped the stone ledge and somersaulted, releasing the ledge before she hit her back against the rock. Slowly, lightei than the stale air in the cavern, she drifted to the floor below.

What seemed like a tenday later, when her feet touched the ground, Meisha sank into a crouch, grateful for the chance to bend her knees. Her spine cracked as she swiveled around to loosen her sore muscles.

By her light spell, Meisha could see the passage angled off to the right, the formerly smooth tunnel walls pockmarked with crags and fissures.

She drew her hand along the ground and found what she had hoped to find. Shaera's footprints hugged the wall. They moved steadily, and Meisha saw no traces of blood or torn clothing to indicate injury. She breathed a little easiet as she continued on down the tunnel.

In the quiet, with half her mind alert on the ttail and watching for danger, Meisha's thoughts drifted at random. Varan's words came unexpectedly into focus.

You've never shown any indication of friendship…

She'd grown up on the streets of Keczulla, tunning in packs with othet children of the same age and situation: a perpetual state of half-starved viciousness. She would never have risked her life for any of the othet Wraiths, not when a loaf of bread was worth killing fot. Why did she cate about the future of a nobleman's daughter like Shaera? Why was Shaera worth risking her life for, when the Wtaiths were not?

They had nothing in common. Shaera was refined and educated as Meisha never would be. The girl had never experienced the kind of hunger that was an acid in the belly, blighting any other rational thought.

Perhaps it was simply that Vatan didn't care. Her teacher had the capacity for kindness; she had seen glimpses of emotion behind his power, but ultimately, the willwas not there, Meisha thought.

Twice now, she'd been disappointed by those she'd chosen to trust. Yet here she was, groping in the dark after a stupid girl who hadn't sense enough to take a companion on her fool's errand.

Meisha picked up her pace, aware of a downward trend to the passage. At first she hadn't felt it, and if the rate of descent didn't change, she might have

miles of tunnel to cover before she reached the bottom.

She stopped briefly to eat cold meat and a biscuit she'd taken from the stores. Before discovering the lower tunnels, Varan had kept a well-stocked food supply that often included fresh fruits and vegetables Meisha had never seen before. She hadn't thought to ask where they came from, until they were gone.

When she resumed her walk, Meisha discovered an abrupt end to the tunnel aftet roughly twenty feet. The passage fell away again, but this time, instead of being sheer, jagged rocks riddled the drop-off.

Meisha leaned over the edge to touch one of the rocks with her fingertip. Filed, she thought, to a razor edge. She drew her hand back and smeared the dot of blood away.

The architect of the Climb had gone to a great deal of effort to make the descent from the spider to the star as long and as treacherous as possible. If it were the wotk of the Howlings, to guard their stronghold, how had the dwarves ever traversed such a passage? Surely, there must be an easiei way to move between both sets of caverns.

But if such a path existed, Meisha thought, even Varan did not know of it.

Removing a length of rope from her pack, Meisha tied one end around the nearest protruding stone spike. She looped the other end through her belt and slowly fed out the rope as she walked down the slanted wall.

At the bottom of the short climb, she found the remains of the ttap.

A ptessure plate smeared with blood sat crookedly at the base of the wall. Meisha touched the plate and found it sticky. The ttap had triggered recently. She examined the immediate area. Following a line of fissures in the rock, she saw that the release of weight had caved in a false ceiling directly above the plate, spilling a hail of large rocks down on the passage.

Meisha ctawled amid the rubble, shoveling stones aside with her bare hands. Dust rose in dry clouds. Her eyes burned and watered. Meisha scraped an arm across them and worked mostly by touch.

Finally, her hands encounteted something soft. She uncovered a spill of red hair, and gradually Shaera's upper torso came into view. Blood had dried in a mask over half her face. Meisha put her fingers against the girl's neck and found a beat. Miraculously, she had survived the trap.

The heat from Meisha's hands seeped into Shaera's cold flesh. The girl stirred, moaning when she tried to lift her head.

"Be still," Meisha hissed. She ran her hands along Shaera's spine. "Your back is broken, at least. I don't know how many other bones."

She hadn't expected injuries this extensive. Varan would be able to tend her, but Meisha didn't think she could risk moving Shaera far. Even with magical aid, the jostling would likely kill her.

"What do I do?" she whispered, gazing back and forth down the empty tunnel. She didn't know if she were speaking to herself, Varan, or the ghostly presence that had aided het. In any case, she received no answer.

Meisha sat down beside Shaera, who had lapsed into unconsciousness again. Meisha listened to her breathing in the silence and detected a faint gurgle she didn't like.

"Where are you, Master?" she said. She realized then how much she'd hoped for Varan to follow her. No matter what magical experiment he was juggling, he wouldn't let Shaera die here. For all his selfishness, he was not a monster

Meisha wrapped her arms around her knees, intending to keep watch. The wizard would come, she was certain of it.

As soon as she allowed herself to relax, exhaustion stole ovet her. She dozed in fits, tucked between a wall studded with jagged spikes and the pile of rubble.

The only pocket of life for miles, Meisha thought faintly, and a fragile one it was.

She roused to darkness and stinging pain in her fingers. At first, Meisha thought it was the cold, but then she felt fur under her hands. Revulsion shook her instantly awake. She chanted the words to bring back her light.

Two rats crawled on Shaera's chest. Meisha swatted them viciously into the wall, impaling one on a spike.

Her hands shook as she adjusted Shaera's bloody shirt, covering the ugly bites.

"Forgive me," she said haltingly. She'd fotgotten Shaeta's a long-ago lesson, that light was the only thing that kept away the tats.

She brushed the hair back from Shaera's face, wondering how long they'd been asleep. The apprentice's eyes fluttered open and looked blearily up at her. She opened her lips a crack, but only air escaped, a thick wheeze that Meisha feared was Shaera ttying to breathe through blood.

"Varan is coming for us," Meisha said urgently, even as the light in the woman's eyes started to waver. "Do you hear me, Shaera? You have to hold on a little longer." Her voice quivered; tears burned her throat. "I can hear them in the tunnel. Listen, they're coming down the slope."

Shaera licked her lips and whispered something barely audible. Meisha didn't understand the language, but the rise and fall of the words was familiar-the rhythm of prayer. When the words trailed off, the light in Shaeta's eyes went dark.

Meisha sat perfectly still fot a long time. Shaera's cheek rested heavy and cold on her hand. Absently, she wiped the blood from the girl's face with her sleeve. She should have done it earlier but hadn't thought to. When her face was clean, Meisha laid the girl's head back and closed her vacant eyes.

"He didn't come."

Meisha heatd her voice, but the words seemed to come from far away. Dazed, she rose to her feet. Her movement awoke fresh scurrying in the shadows. The rats waited just outside the pale circle of het light, ready to dart in for a meal.

Meisha stared into the darkness. Fire awakened within het. Heedless of the danget, Meisha reached deep inside herself and found the untouched well of powet Varan had warned her about.

She gazed down at Shaera's corpse, half-buried in the rubble. Fire sprang up in quivering columns, forming a protective ring around the girl's body.

Illuminated by the fire ring, Shaera's face appeared peaceful. Meisha committed it to memory, then made a swift gesture with her hand.

The columns fell inward like spokes on a flaming wheel. Shaera's body ignited, the fire burning so hot and fast that it consumed her flesh in less time than it had taken to cast the spell.

When the fire died, Meisha tried to slow her breathing. She quickly gave up. She would not find calm again. Only one thing would satisfy her now.

Kneeling among the stones, Meisha scooped up a handful of ash and put it in one of her empty pouches. Whatever else remained of Shaera would have to stay in the tunnel. Meisha prayed her spirit would find the halls of whatever god or goddess she'd been praying to.

Taking up her rope, Meisha started the long climb back to Varan's sanctuary. She could feel the heat

building within her. Darkly, she welcomed it.

He was waiting for her. Jonal must have warned him. Meisha made sure he felt the heat before he saw her.

She came around the corner at a leisutely walk. She projected no flame, but she could see Varan's eyes watering as he beheld her. Swiftly, he cast up a barrier against her spell.

"Gods, you are magnificent to behold," he whispered; "You are fire."

She didn't answer, only increased the heat. She would burn through the spell shield if she had to.

"Meisha," Varan said calmly, "can you hear me? Are you all right, firebird?"

She stood like a statue. "Whete is Shaera?"

"You went to look for her, Meisha. Don't you temember?"

Meisha shook her head from side to side. The air rippled in the wake of the movement. "That is the question you should be asking. 'Where is Shaera?' " Meisha saw the red glow now, the magic radiating in an aura around her. "Say it!"

"Where is Shaeta?" Varan said.

"Burnt on a pyre," replied Meisha. "She resrs in the Climb alone." Her voice turned deadly. "I think one of us should join her."

"Do you want it to be you, Meisha?" Varan asked sadly. "Because it will be, if you persist in this. Powerful as you are, you are overwhelmed by grief and exhaustion."

"This is all because of your discovery!" Meisha spat. "Whatever great treasure lies buried beneath our feet that's more impottant than the lives of yout charges!"

"I don't expect you to comprehend it, Meisha," Varan said, "but I thought you at least undetstood my own nature. I told you I was selfish. My Art is the only thing that brings me joy. You, the other elementalists, are a means to that end. I have no interest in being a father to any of you. The choices you make in the wotld are yours. The consequences of this, you alone will bear."

He stepped back, dropping the barrier. Moisture sizzled on the tunnel walls.

"Make your choice, Meisha," he offered her. "Use me-as I am using you-to learn what you can, and all Faeriin will be open to you. Or hurl your fire, and I will strike you down, grieve for a day at the horrendous waste of potential, and go back to wotk." His voice was harsh. "What will it be?"

Meisha's eyes leaked tears that evaporated almost immediately on her cheeks. She closed her eyes and let out a strangled, miserable scream that echoed off the cave walls. Het head snapped back, and she poured her power into the ground. Still, there was no visible flame, but the stone at her feet bubbled, burning through the soles of her boots. The release

of power wracked her body; her neck muscles pulled taut.

Varan watched her until gradually the convulsions diminished and ceased. She pitched forward, senseless.

Jonal told her later that Varan had gone down the Climb to retrieve Shaera's ashes.

He kept a spell lock-his petsonal sigil-on Meisha's door during her long recovery. At Varan's behest, the water elemen-talist tended her basic needs, but left her chamber as soon as he could.

If the apprentices had not been sufficiently afraid of her before, they were certainly terrified now, Meisha realized.

Shaera had been the only one among them not truly frightened by her power.

When she'd healed enough, she went to Varan.

"Where will you go?" her master asked.

He stood in his workroom, as usual. Meisha stood in the doorway. She refused to entet the room ever again.

"To the Harpers," she said.

"An interesting choice." Varan had cleared the walls of magical writing. The room glowed with torchlight. "Much like wizatds, the Harpers are not well thought of in Amn. You'll find them eager to take you, if you

can find them, though I wonder if they will undetstand you as I do."

"I don't see how that matters," Meisha said. Her face was expressionless.

"Perhaps it does not. They may be able to give you what I could not, and that may be enough." He walked to the dootway, and might have touched her, but Meisha stepped back, a warning shining in her eyes.

Varan sighed. "You must let me say good-bye, firebird, and give you some words of caution. If you let the fire consume you, or use it to lash out, the Harpers will never take you. My promise to you stands. You have a home here for as long as you need it. You have my ring," he said, looking at het hand.

Meisha closed her fingers into a fist. The gold band pressed into her skin. She'd considered leaving it behind, and patt of het wondeted why she still wore it at all. She would nevet return to the Delve, even if the Harpers forsook her, and no matter how badly she might need Varan's sanctuary.

"Farewell, Master," she said.

"Good luck, Meisha Saira." The wizard smiled at her, the same affectionate smile she remembered adoring as a child.

Even now, the smile affected her, made her think he actually cared about het and her future.

Meisha forced herself to turn away, and she didn't look back as he chanted the spell that would send her back into the sunlight.

CHAPTER 12

Amn 1 Marpenoth, the Year of

Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

Meisha listened to the rush of the tivet Vudlur beneath het feet and watched the man stride up the western bulge of the Star Bridge.

He wore tarnished chain mail and a plain but well-kept tunic of mud-brown, with gauntlets and a studded belt to match. Standing easily at six feet, he had broad, muscled shoulders. His hair and mustache wete bronze; his skin burned Calishite dark, but his blue eyes belonged in the Notth. Meisha knew better on both counts. Kail Morel was a son of Amn, and up until a tenday ago, Amn had believed him dead. "Well met, Kail," she said, extending a hand. "It's been a while, Meisha." Kail glanced at her bare fingers. "I don't think so."

The Harper smiled. "Still afraid I might burn, even aftet all these years?"

"Why do you think we'te surrounded by water?" Kail leaned against the bridge rail. "I take it you've heard the news?"

"There's talk of little else," Meisha said. "Dhairr Morel's death shocked and saddened Amn, but she is inconsolable to learn his only son yet lives to claim his estate."

"I'm not surprised." Kail turned in the direction of distant Keczulla. "Thank you for making the journey.

My father spent his last years in Keczulla. It's the only city where Morel assets survived intact, after the war."

Meisha nodded. In the years after Kali left Esmeltaran, humanoid armies led by two ogre mages-Sythillis and Cyrvisnea, allied with followers of the church of Cyiic-had attacked the city and a fair portion of southern Amn. Amn's defenders-Meisha among them-hadn't been able to beat back their armies, and the port city of Murann had fallen to the new Sythillisian Empire. The cities of Esmeltaran and Imnescar had been devastated in the attack, and many of the merchant families lost their entire holdings. In the year since the wat began, the humans and monsters had contrived an uneasy truce between them, but Amn had only just begun its tecovery.

"You have a long road ahead," Meisha said, "if the froth at the mouths of the Bladesmile and Angathi families is any indication. From the gossip I've gathered, your father had a fair share of outstanding debts, which you've also inherited."

Kail sighed. "Judging by their eagerness, I'd say I have until Nightal to find a way to pay them."

"And what will you do once you manage this miracle?"

"I'll find Balram."

There was venom enough in those three words to fill a hun-dred rivers. "Yet you've found no ttace of him or Aazen since before the war," said Meisha.

"Thus far, they have eluded you. They could be dead, and you would never know."

"Balram's a survivor. I'll find him," Kail said. "What I need from you is information about the people who served my father at the time of his death. I don't recognize any of their names or faces."

Meisha was confused. "To my knowledge, Morel could afford little more than a skeleton household staff. They would not be a threat."

"Thete is also a wizard," Kali said.

Meisha snorted. "Morel, hire a wizard? In Amn? Impossible."

"His name is Syrek Dantane. He hails from Waterdeep and claims my father hired him a year ago for protection. I need to know if this is ttuth."

Meisha nodded slowly, considering. "Difficult, but I can try. Waterdeep is too large. The most accutate infotmation will come from his time in Amn. Wizards are hard to hide. If he ever acted openly, someone will know of it."

"There's one more thing." Kali reached in a pouch and produced a small object that captured the sunlight. "When I cornered Meraik, he had this on him. He hadn't been in contact with Baltam for some time, but he was kind enough to point me on the path to finding the rest of Balram's men."

Meisha took the small ctystal. Its weight in het palm was so familiar that her skin prickled. The crystal was a mirror of the memory stone Varan had

shown her as a child. She turned the crystal in her palm and saw the wizard's mark on the underside.

Why would Balram's man have one of Varan's possessions? Meisha thought. As far as she knew, her master had never sold his creations. To him, they were beyond price.

Meisha's heartbeat quickened, but she schooled her features to reveal nothing. "Beautiful," she said.

"Is it magical?" Kali asked.

"The mark on the base indicates sorcery." That much was truth, Meisha thought. "I can't say what it's used for, but I know someone who might. My former teacher, Varan Ivshar, is skilled in the making and identification of magical items. What makes you think this is connected to Balram?" she asked carefully.

"Just a feeling," Kail said. "Or maybe it's desperation. The trail has gone cold. I have to pick it up somewhete."

"And in the meantime, you've not only returned to the silks and soft beds of merchant nobility," Meisha said, deliberately provoking him to steer the conversation to safer territory, "but you go to salvage the house and fortune of Haig's murderer."

Kail's expression darkened. "Are we going to tread that path again, Meisha? I never lied to you. My father acted under

Balram's manipulation. I place the blame where it belongs."

"As you say. AH I see is a murder almost ten winters old and no one to pay the price. I've been waiting a long time, Kail."

"I know," he said. "This crystal may be the key to finding him. Will you aid me?"

"Yes," she said, reluctantly. "I can look into Dantane soon enough," she said. "The crystal will take more time. I'll be in touch when I have information."

"You have my gratitude," Kail said.

"I don't need it." Meisha untied the strings of a scarred leather pouch that hung from her belt and offered it to Kail. "This is for you."

Kali took the pouch. "What is it?"

"Another inheritance-it belonged to your mother."

Kail froze, looking stricken. "How did you find this?"

"I traced her from your description," said Meisha. "She was killed fighting Zhents on the road east of Athkatla, if you're curious. Haig's account of her was accurate. She was banished from Morel's house for her affiliation with the Harpers, and threatened with the death of her son if she tried to return to take him away. So she asked Haig to watch over you. I believe they were eithet onetime lovers or close companions for him to devote so much of himself to the task. At any rate, the pouch was all the material goods I could find of her. I've been keeping it, for just this sort of parting."

Kail stood in shocked silence, absorbing the words. Finally, he said, "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you tread in your father's footsteps so readily," Meisha said in disgust. "I wanted you to know the man you're honoring."

"He's my father," Kali said.

"My fathet sold me fot food," Meisha said bluntly. "Blood means nothing to me, unless someone cares enough to shed it on my behalf. That, I would be a fool to ignore, as you are a fool to exchange your companions for a life among the merchant fops."

Kali squeezed the pouch in a fist. "I don't want this."

Meisha nodded but didn't take it from him. "Legacies are often that way," she said. "This one is yours. Deny or embrace it as you choose, but you can't change it. Welcome home, Kali."

She turned and strode from the bridge, leaving him with the rush of the river and old memories for comfort.

Overhead, a goshawk ciied out. Kail watched its shadow cross the river. A sudden temptation to throw the pouch in the water seized him, but his curiosity proved stronger. He tied the long strings around his neck and tucked the pouch away. His thoughts were full of what he'd just leaf ned. But could he trust it? Could he trust Meisha? Although the volatile Harper had kept her word, never harming his father, Kail knew little about her or her past. Why should she take such an interest in his?

He looked again in the ditection of Keczulla and forced his attention to the mattet at hand. One legacy at a time, he thought.

Midmorn the following day, Rays Bladesmile would be entering The Thirsty Gnome. Kali merely had to wait for the man to quit the place in his usual drunken stupor.

His first test as a merchant lord, Kali thought as he rode to the city. He'd best not be late to his first business meeting;

CHAPTER 13

Amn 1 Marpenoth, the Year of

Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

Meisha walked blindly, absorbed in her thoughts. Kail had long left her sight, on his way to Keczulla. She hadn't been back to the city of her birth since leaving the Delve and Varan's tutelage. As the wizard had predicted, the Harpers were eager to welcome her, but Meisha could feel them always watching, gauging her power and temperament. Without acknowledging it, Meisha had followed Varan's advice and kept het anger-mostly-in check.

The thought of het master and their final parting brought a swell of unpleasant memories to Meisha's mind. Even the company she kept with the Harpers hadn't been able to banish her past with the wizard and his underground home.

She'd promised Kail she would look into where the crystal came from. Meisha clutched the small object in her hand. She'd sooner destroy the magical toy than question its owner. She'd sworn long ago never to teturn to the Howling Delve.

How she could consider breaking that vow for a man who'd once threatened her life, Meisha had no idea.

Obviously, something about Kali Motel affected her. Maybe it was that night in Esmeltatan, when he'd been willing to burn alive rather than let her get to his father. She'd never witnessed such loyalty. Or

perhaps it was what she'd learned of his family in the years since meeting him.

Or maybe it had nothing at all to do with the merchant's son, and everything to do with her own private demons. If she could make peace with her former teacher, perhaps she could move forward. She could feel as if she belonged to the Harpers instead of merely fulfilling a role.

Meisha shook her head in disgust. Keeping her emotions buried had softened her.

She lifted het hand, examining the small gold ring on her finger. She'd never gotten rid of the magical gift-in fact, she rarely took it off.

"I don't want to go," she whispered aloud, surprised at how frightened her voice sounded, "but I don't have a choice, do I, Master?" A part of her still lived in the Delve, whether she chose to admit it or not.

She spoke the command word on the band, and the ring winked with a brief, magical burst. The radiance spread outward to engulf the Harper's entire body.

The sunlight disappeared.

Meisha blinked the white light from her eyes as the ever-present chill of the underground seeped through her jerkin. Water dripped in a distant rhythm, a sound from her earliest memories of Varan. With it came the familiar sense of intangible dread, a feeling she'd tried to forget in the years since her tutelage had ended.

She took comfort in the fact that she was still in Amn, albeit far beneath the land's surface. Varan had wisely scorned the idea of taking up residence in a populated area. A wizard living openly in a tower or estate would not go unmolested. Amn had persecuted wizards longer than Varan had been alive-for crimes he'd had no part in, but that didn't matter. The people still remembered the plagues, the waves of magical death wrought by practitioners of arcane magic. Amnians were not forgiving, which made Syrek Dantane's presence in Kail's house all the more confusing. What had Morel been thinking?

Meisha pushed the thoughts aside. She had more troubling concerns. She had to find Varan and learn how one of Balram's men came into possession of het master's work.

As Meisha's eyes adjusted to the dimness, she realized the cavern in which she stood was unfamiliar. Her ring should have teleported her directly to her old chamber, unless some magic of Varan's had malfunctioned.

Automatically, Meisha drew a stiletto from her boot and listened. Three of Varan's enspelled stalactites cast a dull glow from the ceiling. By their light, she could see two tunnels branching off opposite ends of the cavern. The only other features of the chamber were two gaping holes: a wide shaft dug into the cavern's ceiling and a deep chasm in the floor directly beneath.

Cautiously, Meisha approached the edge of the chasm and looked down. Chaareff she chanted, and het stiletto burst into flame. The fire licked along the

blade to stroke her fingers, but she ignored the heat. Twisting her wrist, she flicked the blade, dropping a tiny ball of fire down the hole. It plummeted quickly out of sight, the last butst of light in some dying creature's eye. The fire illuminated writing on the walls of the chasm, but the script was unlike the markings on her ring. Not Varan's work, then-some other wizard? Either way, Varan must have known they were here.

Off to the side of the chamber lay a pile of rope that looked like it had once been a net. One end was tied to a nearby stalagmite, but the rest was hacked into several pieces.

Meisha extinguished het blade with a word, but at the same time, she found herself bathed in green light. She dived away, landing hard on her elbow just as a circle of light filled the ceiling shaft and shot downwatd. The green thread briefly connected the two holes.

A portal, she thought. She got to het feet as the first figures dropped through the magical doorway.

There were six in total, but they came through in pairs. Magic slowed theit descent, allowing them to twist in midair to avoid plummeting down the chasm. They landed opposite het across the hole.

A woman and five men-one a halfling. Meisha managed to note that much befote they saw her. The chasm yawned between her and any close-range weapons, but the woman had a crossbow. She and the halfling stood off to one side. Three other men stood behind them, one in robes with a wand

swinging from his belt. Their leader was sizing her up just as she evaluated them.

The wizard drew his wand and loosed a flame arrow, illuminating a black beard curled around thick lips. Not bothering to dodge, Meisha readied her stiletto. The missile streaked toward her. At the last instant she braced herself for the impact and watched the attacking wizatd's eyes widen when she simply absorbed the spell against her chest.

"My turn," she said around a plume of smoke, but she had already buried her blade in his abdomen. She turned to face the halfling and the woman.

"Take her alive," said the leader, but Meisha drowned him out with a spell. Her eyes glowed red in the semi-darkness. The woman raised her crossbow, but Meisha finished her spell, thrusting both hands out from her body, the flats of her palms pressed tightly together. A searing jet of wind like the breeze off a coal fire shot across the chasm, slamming into the halfling. The gust lifted him off his feet, driving him into the far wall. The crossbow bolt skittered away across the cavern floor as the woman fell to the ground.

The other men charged, coming from both sides of the chasm. The hot wind stalled them. Meisha tan straight at the datk abyss, the spell sweeping before her in a billowing arc.

She jumped, buoyed up by the wind, cleating the chasm easily and landing on the other side. This caught her attackers by surprise, leaving her only the woman to contend with. She reached out,

grabbing Meisha's arm, thinking the Harper meant to run, but Meisha instead dropped flat to her back. Her momentum pulled the woman down. Continuing the movement, Meisha wedged her foot in the woman's abdomen and pushed, somersaulting her backward and down into the chasm.

Meisha started to sit up, but the woman caught the lip of the hole and Meisha's shoulder, dragging her back and costing het the opportunity fot anothet spell. She wrenched free, but the men were pushing through the wind and closing in on het.

Grabbing anothet daggei, Meisha drove the blade upward into the back of the first man's thigh. He howled in pain and dropped heavily against her. She pushed him away and felt a hot sting at her lower back. Meisha went down with a cry, unable to recover as the leader came in from behind and grabbed a handful of her dark hair.

Meisha felt strands rip from her scalp as he dragged her backward. Stone sctaped het skin, and she lost her grip on her dagger. She kicked and clawed until she felt empty air beneath her head.

The leader drew his dagger and straddled her, letting her head and upper totso fall free over the lip of the chasm.

Immediately, Meisha felt the blood rush to het head, her muscles tightening painfully as she tried to balance herself above the abyss. He snatched one of her flailing arms and brought the back of her hand down in a whip crack on a protruding stone.

Meisha screamed, her hand flopping uselessly in her attacker's. He laid the broken wrist straight against her side and waited while the other pair of men helped the woman ovet the lip of the chasm. She smiled at Meisha's white face.

"Stay still," the leader advised when Meisha tried to move. "See to Watin and Tetshus," he told the test of the group.

"I'm still kicking." Picking himself up, the halfling lit a torch. He bent over the wizard Meisha had stabbed and shook his head. "He's dead, Aazen."

The leader sighed. "Retrieve the chest. They will have it waiting."

When the group moved off down one of the tunnels, the leader turned his attention to Meisha. "If you fight me, I'll stand, and your weight will pull you ovet the edge," he said. "Your hand is broken. You can cast no spell without great pain. Do you understand?"

But Meisha's attention was drawn to a pool of blood steadily spreading around the man's boots. The sting at her back had been a stab wound. She was bleeding to death while the bastard sat atop her like a king on a throne. Flames blazed in her eyes, an awakening of raw, sorcerous power.

The leader leaned back. Meisha statted to slide towatd the darkness. She tried to finish the spell, but the strength slowly ebbed from her body, replaced by a numbing cold. She couldn't concentrate. Her spell died half-formed on her lips.

"I might heal you," the leader said, steadying her, "if you answer my questions."

Meisha had the will to chuckle. "If you heal me, I'll kill you."

The man seemed unconcerned. "Who are you?"

Meisha didn't answet. If she timed it right, she might be able to lock het knees around his waist, pull him back into the chasm. She could at least take the bastard with her.

A sharp blow across her cheek forced Meisha's attention back-to her murderer's face.

"Varan Ivshar," the leader tried again, and Meisha's narrowing world came statkly back into focus. "So you do know the wizard," the man said, seeing her reaction. "I hoped so."

He knew of Vatan. Meisha licked dry lips. "Where is he?" she asked.

The man didn't answer. Meisha squirmed, moaning. The tautness of her muscles would only cause her to bleed out faster. The man eased back, drawing her away from the hole. He knew she was too weak to fight anymote.

"What happened to the wizard?" he asked, watching het carefully.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Meisha said, her expression unfeigned. It seemed to satisfy him.

The man rose to his feet, gazing down at her indecisively. "I'd hoped you'd be able to offer me more," he said. He reached down and his fingers brushed the silver pin of the Harpers. "I don't believe I can justify letting you live." He listened as voices echoed from the tunnel. "They won't allow it."

Meisha waited, expecting him to stab her again, or push her body over the edge with his boot. He did neither, instead turning his attention to the group re-entering the cavetn. One of the men carried a large chest held together by rusted metal bands.

"Warin's spell is gone," said the halfling. "We can't levitate the chest. It'll take a bit to secure it by rope."

"You have ten breaths," the leader said.

"Take me that long to tie it off, won't it? Gods only know what'll happen if it falls, Aazen."

The leadei nodded but did not look pleased; "You're right, of coutse." He pointed at Meisha. "Cast the spell, and you will live."

"How did you find this place?" It had taken her years of research to discovet the main entrance to the Delve, and then she found it only because she knew there was something there to find. She had never known this portal room existed. Meisha tried to pull herself up to her elbows, to see the man's face by the portal light. His hait was datk and shorn close to his head, as if he'd cut it with his own knife. Fine scar lines peppered a clean-shaven jaw, marring an othetwise attractive face. "Who are you?"

"We're thieves," the leader said.

"What could you hope to steal from a cave?"

"The Delve is much more than a cave. You should have known that, before you entered. Cast the spell."

She lay back and closed her eyes. "I don't know it."

"Very well. I offered you your life."

"Done, Aazen." The halfling tossed the leader the other end of the rope. He looped it twice around his waist and tied off the end.

Meisha watched him hand a waterskin off to the halfling, who uncorked it and squirted a thick, pastelike substance into his small hand. The skin went around to each member of the group until it was empty, then the halfling tossed the containet carelessly toward the chasm. It fell short, landing next to Meisha, but no one paid her any further attention. They were busy coating their hands and boots with the substance. The halfling trotted on the balls of his feet toward the cavetn wall. He jumped, his arms outstretched, latching onto the walls like an insect. He scrambled up and across the ceiling, disappearing into the mouth of the shaft. The test followed in the same way.

The leader came last, climbing slower than the rest and towing the chest behind him on the rope. When he'd ascended to the edge of the pottal, the woman braced him as he hauled the chest up. Meisha got her first clear look at it as it passed in and out of the

green light. As she'd suspected, the chest was Varan's. What had they done to him?

With the chest secured, one by one the thieves disappeated up into the portal. When the last had gone, the green light faded.

Meisha rolled onto het side, crawling to the closest tunnel. She knew she would never make it out of the chamber, but anything was bettet than listening to her lifeblood drip down the walls of the chasm.

They'd nicknamed him "Dirty Bones," and for good reason. Talal wriggled out from the pile of waste and garbage that had collected at the mouth of the refuse room. He sniffed. Dirty, yes. He didn't mind dirt. But he was starving, too. That concerned him. He'd gladly be called "Fat Bones," but there just wasn't enough food.

"Not my fault. Can't eat garbage." He surveyed the room.

"Plenty of that, but can you live on it?" No. Unquestionably. He'd already tried. His tongue curled at the memory.

Too much thinking, he decided. Time to scavenge. The raiding party had come and gone. He'd counted to make sure there were no stragglers, just as Gadi had warned him. Then came the green light, then silence. It was the same every time.

Talal moved quickly, pulling a mound of wax that only vaguely resembled a candle from behind one of the rocks. He held it out, duck walking along the winding tunnel to the pottal room.

Gadi had taught him each step in the process. He paused to listen before entering the room. When he peeked to see what lay within, he let out a whoop of delight. The sound echoed in the vast chamber. Talal clamped a filthy hand to his mouth, his eyes darting over the tops of his fingers. When nothing stirred, he rose to his full five-foot height and practically skipped over to the bodies.

There were two of them-two thieves dead. Warmth rose in Dirty Bones. "Two less to worry about. They'll be thrilled." He would hurry, so he could return and tell them.

"Messy," he mutteted as he knelt next to the body of a young woman. Not a tidy kill-like Gadi, he thought-and shoved away all pity for the pretty-faced lass. He went for her boots fitst, feeling inside for pouches or hidden vials. He drew back with a hiss and raised a bloody finger to his mouth. Cautiously, he tried again, and pulled a pair of daggers from each boot. The lass bristled with them.

He worked his way methodically Up her body but found no othet tteasures. There had to be more, the bitch was dressed too well…

A low gtoan escaped the woman's mouth.

"Ho!" Talal felt his spine bounce off something hard and realized it was the cavetn wall on the far side of the room. He'd slammed into it in his tush to get away from the corpse, which continued moaning.

"The walking dead," he squeaked. "I touched the walking dead…" He stared at his hand as if the appendage might suddenly turn black and fall off. He

wiped it furiously on his breeches. The damned things weren't supposed to come back once they bled that much, were they?

Talal wasn't going to take any chances. He felt around until he found a large rock. Holding it at eye level, he approached the body. Up close, he could tell her coloring was off, but it didn't have the deathly pallor of the other bodies he'd seen. Gadi had been much worse. The woman's eyes were closed, but the lashes fluttered as if she slept.

Talal bent closer and felt a shallow breath brush his cheek. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, but he shook away the sensation. "Not dead, that's the problem." Of course he'd known it all along. She didn't look like one of them Shadow Thief bastards anyway. How did she get down here?

"Bad luck, that's how, but we'll fix it… maybe." He wasn't any sott of healer, after all. She could die on the way to the camp. But what in the Hells else was he going to do fot fun?

Talal tossed away the rock so he could get an arm under her legs. He hauled her up, grunting as blood soaked into his bteeches. "If I drop you, Lady, I'm taking it as a sign from the gods this was a bad idea."

CHAPTER 14

Keczulla, Amn 2 Marpenoth, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

Kail passed through a wide stone archway crowned by a sapphire keystone. The gem inset on the opposite side of the arch, a lighter agate, was not nearly as impressive or flawless, but then again, the difference between districts in Keczulla often hinged upon the wotth of a gemstone.

The Keczull clan first gave the city life when it sttuck iron and gold along the Ridge arm of the Cloud Peaks to the north. Unfortunately for all, the mines didn't last, and a little over a century and a half latet, the city was abandoned. It took Pulth Tanislove and his gem mines to bring Keczulla back in 1355 DR. The city had come twice from ruin to prosper in metals and gems, so naturally every aspect of its growth had followed suit, from the four districts: Emerald, Sapphire, Jade, and Agate, to their corresponding wards. The most prosperous families made their homes and businesses in the Mithral and Platinum Wards, and the hierarchy descended from thete. Harbor Moon Ward was last in line and made no attempt to put a false sheen on itself. Kail appreciated that, and he suspected Rays Bladesmile did as well.

Traffic flowed around Kali, merchants bearing carts of wagons of goods packed wheel to wheel on the narrow streets. The ones loaded down with sacks dealt in grain or textiles. Those stacked with chests and lockboxes, their drivers' furtive gazes darting all

around-they were jewelers, like Kali. They carried identical bulging tings of tiny keys-one for every box-like the gleaming teeth of a hundred exotic cteatures. The jostle of theit catts on the pitted streets evoked a discotdant jangle that echoed throughout the ward.

The Thirsty Gnome sat just on the othet side of the archway. Kail waited in the shade of the building, his eyes straying to a particular set of towers nestled in the center of the Gold Ward. He'd been to his father's house once, just after he arrived in the city, but seeing the structure from a distance like this was equally unnerving.

His fathet had had the house in Keczulla built identical to the one in Esmeltaran. The gods alone knew why. It certainly wasn't in keeping with the fashions of Amn, which Amnians themselves freely admitted tended to change like light off a gem facet.

"S'only piss an' ale if you try and sell it for three coppers!" shouted a voice from inside the tavern. Kail pushed away from the arch. Lord Rays was right on schedule.

The door to the tavern burst open, and Rays Bladesmile stormed out, the aforementioned ale stteaming from his chin.

His eyes barely cleared the depths of theit sockets, Kali noted, in a face that more resembled a skull, emaciated and paste white from too much time spent indoots licking the bottom of a tankard. Bladesmile stared angrily around the street as if searching for a fight. When none materialized, he

tottered toward an alley, pulling at his breeches' strings as he went.

Kali followed at a discreet distance. He didn't want the inebriated Bladesmile's wrath turned on him.

The roofs of the adjacent buildings overhung the alley in a crooked arch that swallowed light. Aromas of piss and garbage filled the air. Kail stopped at the alley's mouth, waiting in amused silence as Lord Rays added his own offering to the bouquet.

"You wanting to hold it for me, lad?" Rays muttered without looking up.

"Ah, no, thank you," said Kail.

"Hmph. Then what does Lord Morel want here, at the height of a business day? Yes, I know you," he said, at Kails suiprised look. "You can expect all the Bladesmiles to matk your face."

"Actually, I was looking for Rays Bladesmile."

Rays retied his breeches, adjusted himself, and sptead his hands in a ready swagger. "Well, you've found him, lad, in all his glory. What can I do for the last scion of Morel house?"

"Just Kail, I think, for meetings in back alleys," Kail said with a laugh. "I sought you out to discuss the debt my father owes the Bladesmiles."

"If that's so, you should have known you'd need to speak to Lord Rhor. The debt was substantial enough that accounting for it and any interest accrued-trust

that there'll be plenty to spread around-will fall to him and those immediately undet his eye."

"Yes, but I'm most interested in the sums already transferred to your family, the debt repaid in the fotm of mercenaries," Kali said. "I understand you are still considered the master armsman for the Bladesmile family."

"Gods, you want to talk true business." Rays gave a mock shudder. "Good thing I've already begun drinking. Yes, I'm still head of Rhor's companies, for as long as he deigns to put up with me." He nodded at the inn. "Join me in a bottle, and I might even tell you how much I despise the arrogant bastard."

"Another time, I'd like to hear it." Kali smiled. "Today I'm expected to return to Morel house. I'm hosting a gathering tomorrow evening for some old friends of my father's. Hopefully, by night's end, they will be my friends."

"By that, you mean you hope they won't foreclose on you in the manner of Shilmistan wolves. They're all coming for you, one way or another, and not just the Bladesmiles. Plenty of other families'll turn up claiming 'old' or 'half-forgotten' debts that are neithet. They wouldn't mind taking those markers out of a fotmet adventurer turned man of business."

"Then it's fortunate I'm more the adventuter and less the businessman," Kali said. His smile had steel in it.

Catching the look, Rays laughed. "Well, you won't get trouble from me. As you said, your father paid some of his debts in men, and I'll be damned if Rhor

didn't cheat him something grievous in that deal. He added a fair number of seasoned fighters to my company. I've seen none finer. No, I've no complaints against your father, no matter what people said about him."

"And these-my father's men-do they serve the Bladesmiles still?"

"They do."

"I see." Kail took in a breath, pausing to consider his next words. "I wonder… what a man would have to do to reacquire such fine and loyal warriors."

"The price would be high," Rays warned.

"And worth every copper," Kail said quietly.

Overhead, a familiar cry rang out. Kali lifted an arm as the goshawk glided easily between the narrow buildings and alighted upon his gauntlet. "Welcome back," he said.

"Impressive." Rays scrubbed at the black stubble on his chin. "Is she one of Dhairr's?"

"No," Kali said, "but my father's aviary is extensive. I have not taken a full inventory, but I know of at least two goshawks, a peregrine that flies faster than any eye can follow, and others I couldn't identify."

"Do you intend to maintain it, now that you've taken up residence at the estate?" Rays asked, interested.

"I had not considered it," Kail admitted. "Other marters have been occupying my thoughts. Do you have an interest in hunting birds?"

"Not for that purpose," said Rays. "The greatet Bladesmiles" -he spat again in distaste-"constantly seek the means to make information travel fastet, short of using magic to fuel its steps."

"Of course. I have no doubt my father's specimens could be trained as messengers. If such a service interests the Bladesmiles, Pm certain we could come to an arrangement," said Kail. He went on, "If I may, Lord Rays, I would be honored to have you attend my gathering tomorrow. Beyond the pleasure of your company, I wouldn't mind continuing this discussion in my home."

"In more delicate surroundings?" Rays looked genuinely curious. "Well, lad, if you're brave enough to want me at your table, I accept your invitation and wish you good business." He slapped Kail on the back.

Jostled by the sudden movement, the goshawk let out an ear-splitting shriek and took flight, leaving gouge marks in Kail's leather gauntlet. She soared up between the buildings to glide huffily over the Gold Ward.

The raptor flew gracefully through the wide window of the aviary but came to rest on the ground instead of one of the perches scattered in tiers around the room.

The other raptors screeched in alarm as magic flooded the narrow space. The goshawk's wings

twisted vertically, folding feathers and membtane slowly into the flesh of bare arms. Claws shrank into slendet, feminine toes, which gripped the cold stone floor reflexively as the change wracked her body. When the transformation was complete, Cesira stood, instinctively reaching out with her thoughts to calm the frightened birds.

Forgive me. I will be more thoughtful in the future.

Cesira had no idea what her true voice sounded like. Mute from birth, she did not know why she could touch animals with het thoughts but not her voice, nor did she understand how Silvanus granted her speech when in animal shape, or heard her spells when she chanted in silence. She had simply accepted long ago that the gods must know the hearts and minds of theit followers, and answet accordingly.

Forgive me, she repeated.

When all was quiet, Cesira strode briskly to the door of the tower, which led to a steep flight of stairs. On the landing, she put on the long brown cloak she'd left hanging on a peg earlier that morning. Time to become mistress of the house, she thought, blowing a stray feather out of her tresses.

A servant met her at the base of the staits-the cook, if Cesira remembered correctly. "My lady," the woman said, curtseying quickly. "I've a message for Lord Morel."

Lord Morel, Cesira thought. Gods help het. She looked the woman over, noting with some relief that she bore the new symbol of Morel woven with ribbon

into the collat of het frock: an emerald joined by an elaborate setting to a rathet plain-looking stone. The official story was that Lord Morel meant the symbol as a tribute to Keczulla's roots, its rise from nothing to become the backbone of the Morel jewel business. Conveniently, it also bore the enchantment that allowed Cesira to converse with people, making the plain stone in essence mote valuable than the emerald. Cesira did not miss the irony. What is it? she asked.

"It's from Master Dantane," the cook said, a little uneasily. "He again requests an audience. He wants to know when Loid Morel will be deciding whether he is to stay or go from the house." The woman's tone left little doubt of het feelings on the matter. If the rest of Amn was in the dark about Dantane's profession, it was certainly no secret to the house. "He'd like to speak with Lotd Motel as soon as possible."

I'm sure he would, Cesira said. Please tell him Lord Morel will speak to him just as soon as he returns.

The woman curtseyed again and hurried away. Cesira's gaze strayed across the hall, in the direction of the other tower. The spire had formerly housed Morel's private offices. At some point it became the wizard's living quarters.

Must they all flock to towers and high places, Cesira wondered. She didn't see the appeal. Then again, she knew nothing of Syrek Dantane or his tastes. That worried her, more than she liked to admit.

CHAPTER 15

Keczulla, Amn 2 Marpenoth, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

Aazen approached the Contiall Estate from the tear, nod-ding to Isslun as she strode forward to bar his path. "I need to see him."

"He's waiting for you. We've already heard from the buyet"-she cast a quick glance around the deserted patio- "and the Cowl. We were set up."

"I was set up," Aazen corrected her sharply. "And two Gem Guards ate dead for it."

Isslun shrugged, unconcerned. "If they cannot identify us, what's the wotry?"

"I see your sistei took the lion's share of the wits between you," Aazen sneered. "We're starting to attract attention. If this incident draws concern anywhere near the Council's hearing, how long do you believe the Shadow Thieves will continue to support this operation?"

The Council of Six, Amn's anonymous body of rulers, saw to the needs of the land primarily by keeping business running as smoothly as possible between the merchant families-business which would not include an influx of black matket magical items, not with two Gem Guards dead in the Haibor Moon Ward.

Isslun comprehended none of that. She pouted, catching her lower lip between her teeth. "If you

place so high a value on my sisters wits, perhaps she will welcome you to her bed when you grow cold tonight."

"She already has," Aazen said, closing the door on the twin's shocked face.

His father waited in the library. The few books remaining in the tall, narrow room had gathered a thick blanket of dust. For as long as they'd dwelled here, his father had shown no interest in them.

"Ate you all tight?" Balram asked as Aazen closed the library door.

Aazen felt the abrasions at his wrists where one of the guards had briefly put him in manacles. "Minor wounds. We have a problem."

"I'm aware," Balram said grimly. "A watch commander, Aazen?"

"It was the only way I could see to escape. I took him as hostage. His own men fired the bolts."

Balram nodded, letting it pass. "Jubair was here before you. It seems a member of the Chadossa family approached a contact within the Cowled Wizards concerning a rumor he'd heard about black market magic."

"A rumor including the location of the exchanges and the contents of the latest shipment?" Aazen asked.

His fathet nodded. "So it was Chadossa."

"No doubt the family is having second thoughts about dealing with the Shadow Thieves," Aazen guessed.

"But their son is not."

"What do you mean?"

"Chadossa broke off all contact with us just before their betrayal, all except the boy, the youngest son," said Balram. "He's still buying. There's an exchange tonight. I've left the location up to you. I trust you will be discreet."

Aazen shrugged. "Perhaps he was not privy to his family's intentions. Or they were not aware he was also our client and so failed to warn him. What do you propose to do?"

"I intend to send a message. Chadossa's son will bear it for me, and his sire will learn the price of betrayal."

"You risk the wrath of a powerful family," Aazen warned, but he already knew what his father would say.

"My own family's resources far outstrip any the Chadossas could gathet," Balram said confidently.

"And will your family support such a bold action?" Aazen dated to ask.

Uncharacteristically, his father waved it off with a chuckle. "Even Daen could not argue with the profit alteady amassed in this venture. And if Chadossa acts anything like I expect him to, the authorities

will never trace the message back to us." His father's expression changed as he looked on his son. ' "You'll have to delivet the item to him, Aazen." Aazen kept his face neutral.

"Is there no one else?"

"None of the others will touch the broken items," Balram said. "They're afraid."

So was his fathet, though the man would never admit it. He should be afraid, Aazen thought. Any rational person would be.

"I'll take care of it, Fathet," he said. "There is another issue."

"What is it?"

"When we retrieved the items, we encountered a woman in the Delve-a Harper."

Balram's lip curled. "They turn up in the most inconvenient places. Did you deal with her?"

"I left het to bleed out, but perhaps I shouldn't have. She knew the wizatd. She may have been his apprentice. If so, we could have used her."

Balram shook his head. "Too risky. Secrecy is our best advantage in this, and it's possible she knows another way out. Your only mistake was in not making sure she was dead. We'll take care of that tomorrow."

Aazen nodded. If he had had his way, they would never have returned to the Delve at all. The

memories it held for him were not pleasant ones. He still felt it-the distant menace, the sensation of being trapped-whenever he went down there. "What if more apprentices unexpectedly turn up?" he asked.

"As with the woman, they'll find the Delve a place much changed from what it was before," Balram said.

CHAPTER 16

The Howling Delve 3 Marpenoth, the

Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

Meisha opened her eyes to a blurry world of smoke and stink-the full, cloying smell of sweat and unwashed bodies, broken only by the pungent odor of some kind of herb.

She was still underground, lying on a pallet of blankets. She could make out the uneven rock ceiling by the light of a torch suspended on the wall above her head. Smoke from the brand drifted languidly in the ait until it reached the ceiling, then it was swept away like river water to a darkened corner of the room. If Varan's magics still functioned, he must be nearby, Meisha thought.

She tried to sit up and felt pain lance through her lower back. The stab wound was still fresh. She should be dead. Someone must have found her and treated the wound-Varan?

Meisha felt a stiff bandage encasing her abdomen, which seemed to be the source of the herb scent. But she could tell at least some of the bones in her wrist had reknit while she slept. Whoever had treated her had done so with some magical aid, but not much.

She examined her surroundings. The chamber around her was wide, with a low ceiling that dipped almost to the ground in some corners and fluted upward sharply in others. This place Meisha

recognized. She'd made her pact to become Varan's apprentice here, over a pit of flames.

As an apprentice, she'd taken meals here or used the space for study that did not involve casting. Despite the cold and damp of the underground environment, Varan had had the chamber richly appointed. Placed in the center of the room was a round, cherry wood table-with thicker legs than her own- surrounded by soft, wingback armchairs. Two couches with tasseled silk pillows had flanked a bookcase wedged along the wall. All of it had huddled around small fire pits, with Vatan's ventilation magic handy to carry the smoke away through one of the carved flues in the ceiling.

But now the chamber was stripped of all furnishing. A sagging length of rope hung around her pallet and held a stained sheet for privacy. Meisha could make out dozens more of the boxed-off areas around the chamber. Distorted shapes moved within them like a complex shadow play. People, Meisha thought-a fair number, at that.

She could hear theit voices, sometimes whispering in low tones, other times pitched loudly to catry across the chamber.

"I'm tellin' ye, pick one day for butchering, and we won't have that awful stink to wake to."

"Five toys just today-that's got it, my time's coming up. Always does when yer five times as likely to lose an eye."

"Where's Iadra? Somebody'd best tell her to be puttin' the mark up."

Footfalls tramped on the other side of her sheet. Meisha tensed, but the male voice that drifted over the thin cloth was somehow familiar.

"Tymora's best odds, all I'm saying. Tymora's best odds she don't live through the night."

"You said as much last night," an overly patient female voice answered him. "Return it, please."

"She's not gonna care! You didn't see this blood pool, Har. I pulled her out-no one else was there with her to do the honors. She'd want me to have it." "Get out of my way, Talal."

"Fine. At least let's nudge het and see-see if she's still kicking."

Hands flung the sheet aside to reveal a pair of large eyes surrounded by a nest of dirty blond hait that had not been combed with anything more elaborate than fingers and spit fot many years. The boy couldn't have seen more than two decades of life, and they'd been lean years. His wrists wete the breadth of broom handles, and he crouched like a frog, his spindle legs thickening with muscle at the thighs, as if he squatted and crawled mote often than he walked. He wore a baggy shirt and bteeches. When he moved, the odor wafting off them made Meisha gag.

"It's awake," the boy said, too brightly, as if he were hiding disappointment. "See?" He pointed at her triumphantly, her Harper pin clutched in one dirty hand. "Did that last time. Thought she was dead and whew!" He waggled his fingers and pulled a ghoulish face at the woman who was attempting to push him

aside with het hip. "Back to life again." The boy didn't seem to notice the woman's exasperated shoving. "No one dies reliably these days."

Meisha's hand came up, snagging the boy's wrist like a snake after a mouse.

"Ho, there!"

"That's mine," she croaked, squeezing the mouse until the boy dropped the pin on the ground.

"Got 'im worms for wits, but Talal doesn't mean any hatm," said the woman. She was much older and not nearly as dirty as the boy. Her hair was stark white in the dim torchlight, and so thin Meisha could see patches of skin through the wispy strands. Her eyebrows had worn away long ago, but she had a quick, affectionate smile for the boy even as she chided him.

"Are you in great pain?" she asked Meisha. The same pungent herb smell wafted from her hands as she probed Meisha's bandage.

"Only when I move," Meisha grunted. Truth was, she hurt all over, but part of that was from the cold. Despite the blankets piled on and beneath her, the cavern floor was colder than Meisha ever remembered it being. Not all Varan's enchantments were working, she thought, and her heart sank a little. "Who are you?" she asked, stopping the woman in her ministrations. "Where's Varan? What's happened to this place?"

"Easy," the woman said. "One at a time. I'm Haroun." She pointed to the boy. "This one's Talal.

Your wound is healing. The knife managed to miss everything vital. Still, you were far gone when Talal brought you in. We're allowed only a small number of healing draughts, and we had to use two just to keep you from death."

"You have my thanks," Meisha said with feeling. She sat up gingerly, and with Haroun's help, got to her feet. "My attackers, do you know who they were?"

"Yes." Haroun's voice was strained. "The Shadow Thieves. They come through the glowing doors once every few tendays- the time varies. They don't want us to know when to expect them. She leaned closer, her milky eyes intent on Meisha's. "Tell me, child, did you come through the doorways? Do you know how to open them?"

Meisha shook her head, and the woman's eyes dimmed. "I came by… other means." Before Haroun could ask, she said, "I can't return the same way, but there is a main entrance. It's kept hidden, but I can show you."

Haroun was shaking her head before she'd finished. "No need. That way is closed."

"Closed?"

"Tunnel's sealed off," Talal spoke up. "Bastards caved it in, put something on it when we tried to dig out." He made scooping and filling motions with his hands. "We dig-stays full."

"An enchantment," Meisha said, temembeting the wizard from the raiding party. "Probably activated from the other side of the cave-in. All it would

require is a new casting each day, perhaps not even that often." She looked at the boy. "They trapped you in the Delve? How long have you been here?"

Talal and Haroun exchanged glances. "I'll show her," the boy offered, shrugging.

Haroun hesitated, appearing almost upset, but finally she nodded. "Go. She'll need to see the places where it's safe to walk. Show her gently, Talal. Do nothing foolish."

The boy flashed an indignant, "do I ever" look and offered his sleeve to Meisha in imitation of a grand lord escorting his lady. Meisha suppressed a groan, selected the cleanest possible scrap of cloth to grasp, and they were off, weaving among the cubed warrens to a cleared central path that led to an attached passage.

Talal yanked a torch from the wall sconce. He ignored the shouts of dismay from the corner of the cavern subsequently plunged into darkness. "This way."

They walked a short distance down a passage Meisha remembered. It led to a series of carved out alcoves fitted with thick wooden doors.

When Varan had first come to the Delve, he'd used the spaces as storage, but later they became small, private quarters for the apprentices. The wizard's domain was only a small part of the tunnel system. Varan's magic had placed the age of some of the lower tunnels as contemporaries of Deep Shanatat. The wizard speculated the Delve might even have been an outpost of that great dwarven realm.

Talal tugged on her arm. Absorbed in her thoughts, Meisha hadn't noticed when they'd stopped. Framed by a pearly, flow-stone waterfall, Talal pointed behind her to a stretch of wall. Meisha turned and blinked.

Numbers covered the stone from floor to ceiling, arranged in neatly ordered columns like a moneylender's account. All were dates, marked with the change of month and the change of year. They ended Marpenoth 3 of 1374 DR.

"Iadra marks a new one every day," said Talal.

"1370," Meisha read from the top of the first column. "Eleasias 20. Four years ago."

"Date we found the entrance. Wish we hadn't," Talal muttered.

"You-all of you?" Meisha shook her head. "Impossible. Varan shields the entrance with magic and places a ward on the perimeter."

A shadow passed over the boy's face. "There was no magic. The way was just sitting there, open as you please. We wouldn't have gone in, but the brigands had statted to circle. There were too many of us not to be noticed out in the open."

"What were you doing all the way out here?"

"Running," Talal said.

Meisha waved an impatient hand. "From brigands, yes, but what-"

"No-from Esmeltaran."

"Esmeltaran?" Meisha echoed. Then it hit her: 1370. Meisha didn't need to do the calculation. She knew. "The ogres," she said, and Talal nodded. "You're refugees from the war."

"We were headed for Keczulla when they started shadowing us."

"The men from the portal?" Meisha asked.

Talal actually laughed. "No, the brigands-soft bellies by comparison. There were a lot more of us then. We moved in a group, tight as Tyr's arse. Only thing kept us alive-they didn't want to take on the whole bunch of us. But they smattened up, the longer they stayed with us. Picked off the stragglers, set traps-that sort of thing. We nevei saw any of the cowardly bastards. Thought we could wait them out in the caves. We should've known something was wrong if damn brigands wouldn't follow us inside."

"Did you explore? Was there anyone living in the caves?" Meisha wanted to know.

Talal hesitated. He swung the torch at one of the alcoves.

Meisha went for the doot, but the boy caught het wrist.

"Don't burst in like that!" he hissed. "You want to kill us all?"

"It's Varan, isn't it?" Meisha said. At his blank look, she pressed, "You found a wizard here." Talal's lip

curled. "Pity us, yes."

Meisha freed her arm. "He's the man I came to see- my teacher! He can get us all out of here."

The boy stared at her. "Certainly, Lady," he said, bowing her mockingly toward the door. "You go right on in and ask him to do that."

Dread welled inside Meisha, but she pushed past Talal. The door scraped the stone floor as she wrenched it open, dripping dirt and cold sediment down on her. She ignored it in the face of what lay within.

The room was littered with garbage. Broken bits of junk covered every available inch of floor space, like the aftermath of a child's tantrum. Varan sat in one corner of the squalid room, his back to her, arms moving as if in the midst of a complicated spell. Small, white maggots swarmed over an uneaten plate of meat and bread on the floor next to him.

Meisha slowly circled the rear wall, putting herself in the wizard's periphery so he would know she was there. Varan held an object in his hands, an opaque sphere caged in a knot of iron bands. Within the sphere, tiny lights winked and danced like ttapped stars. Wherever Varan touched the bands, the lights would gather, drawn zipping across the empty space to swirl around his fingertips. The collected magic in the room was so intense it hutt Meisha's head to concentrate too closely on any one point. And the Aft did not issue only from the sphere.

Meisha uttefed a quick word and swept a fanning gesture the length and width of the room. As the

spell took effect, the light nearly smote her blind. Most of the intact objects on the floor, with the exception of the food, contained magic-slight in some instances, dangerously strong in others.

"Varan, what have you been doing?" Meisha whispered, but no one answeted. She glanced behind het, but Talal had not followed her into the room. He stood, framed in the crack of the half-closed door, watching Varan. His expression showed a mixture of hatred, awe, and fear.

Meisha took a step forward. She felt the boy make a restless motion. Her eyes shot a question at him, and a warning-don't try to stop me.

Talal appeared torn. Reluctantly, he stepped into the toom, just far enough to whisper, "He won't answer you. He never talks to us."

"What's wtong with him?"

"Lady, you'd need a bucket full of scribes to make that list. Just come away," he pleaded.

Meisha shook het head. "I have to see him." She crept toward the wizard, carefully toeing aside the non-magical debris to make a path.

She knelt next to her former teacher, but he did not stir from his work. He smelled much worse than Talal. His gray-blue robes were stained-Mystra's mercy, in some places charred-and soiled by old urine and waste. Her eyes traveled upward, and Meisha gasped at the gaunt, cavernous husk that the wizard's face had become.

Varan had been aged when Meisha was young, but the man who sat before her was sucked dry, all his energy and vitality gone. His left eye was missing, and the flesh around the empty socket had melted, folding into itself like a pudding. His one good eye stared dully at the wall as his hands moved in a jerky rhythm over the sphere.

Meisha followed his gaze. A rough parchment drawing floated flat against the cavern wall, illuminated by green radiances. On it someone had scribbled-the hand was too spiky to be Varan's-a drawing of the sphere, with notes along the top and sides of the page.

The lights in the sphere flared, drawn to its center. Suddenly, a sound like shattering glass echoed in the toom, and the lights went out. Gray mist tendtils flowed from the gaps in the iron bands, curling up sinuously to touch Varan's beard.

The wizard's hands shook, as if the sphere had suddenly doubled in weight. It dragged the old man's arms down, and the mist swirled and dissipated. The sphere hit the cavern floor with a thud that Meisha felt through her knees.

Distaste flickered in the wizard's eye. He pushed the sphere aside and tore the drawing from the wall.

"Broken."

Meisha's head snapped up at the sound of the wizard's voice. "Varan?"

"Hello, little firebird," he replied, but his gaze never left the drawing. Carefully, he tore it into strips of

glowing green, flicking each aside like magical confetti.

Relief flooded Meisha at the sound of the old nickname. "Master. What happened to you, to your eye?"

Varan seemed not to hear her. "I broke another one." He selected a brittle piece of meat from the plate and tore off a bite.

"What do you mean, you 'broke' it?" Meisha asked.

"Broken," Varan repeated. "Some of them work, some break. And yet they cling to me, just like you did, firebird. Cling to me, wanting to be fixed. I suppose I'll fix them all, eventually."

"Varan," Meisha said, choking back her revulsion at the white, squirming maggots crawling in the hair around the wizard's lips, "where is Jonal? And Prieces-the other apprentices? Why didn't they aid you?"

"Oh, they're here," Varan said. He patted the small sack he wore tied around his neck. He reached inside and drew out three rings. He dropped them into her cupped hand one at a time. They were identical to the ring Meisha wore, but for the bloodstains.

"Dead?" Meisha couldn't believe it. Three apprentices, and even Jonal, the lowliest among them, bore powerful elemental magic, defenses known only to themselves and Varan. "How?"

But Varan had gone back to his drawing. Meisha picked up the sphere, but whatevet magic it had held

appeared spent.

What happened to the wizard? Her attacker's words drifted back.

"Talal, what..."

But Talal was no longet in the room. Meisha tutned back and found Varan staring at her as if he'd only just discovered she was in the room.

"Firebird, it is good to see you," he said. He lifted a hand to touch her shoulder. The gesture of affection was so familiar it made Meisha's chest constrict.

"Master, how did this happen?" she asked, cupping the melted side of his face gently in her hand.

"This?" Varan twirled a finger in the empty socket. "I believe he took it-or I had to give it away-hard to remember. Bad things are here," he said. Then he shifted the finger, tapping his temple. "But here..." He grinned at her. "Gods are at work."

"Oh, Master-"

"I'm glad you've returned, little one. Yes, you can help me fix them-the broken ones." He touched his hand to the wall next to where the drawing had been. His fingers passed through the rock as if it were water, until he'd sunk to the elbow in stone. When he pulled his hand out, he held a second sphere, smaller than the first and copper-hued.

"What is broken, Varan? Where are those coming from?" Meisha asked. She lifted the pouch away from

his neck, slipping the rings back inside. "What happened to the apprentices?"

"I told you, they're here. Don't fret." His hand closed tightly over hers. With the other, he stroked her hair.

"But what-"

"I told you." Ancient muscles flexed with astonishing strength, slamming her head into the unforgiving stone wall. "Don't fret."

Meisha went down in a burst of red pain and horror. Blindly, she lurched to her back as her teacher towered over her, a terrible, crumbling column of rage and power.

"You should leave now, firebird," he said, his face dark. He murmured something inaudible, and the chamber sparked to life with newly kindled magic. "Leave me alone."

Gasping, cradling her head, Meisha opened her mouth in time to taste fire. The chamber darkened and blurred as if she'd been cast into a deep pool. She could no longer see Varan.

Trembling, Meisha raised herself to her knees and crawled to where she thought the doorway must be. Somewhere along the way the fire went out, but she could smell the smoke of things still burning: rotted meat, clothing, and hair-her own, of course. She slid onto her face and rolled jerkily to put the fires out.

Hands caught her armpits, and Meisha felt herself being dragged out of the room into cooler air. She

heard the door grind shut, and Talal's terrified face filled her vision.

"He t-tried to kill me." Meisha coughed on the smoke from her own burnt clothing.

Talal nodded grimly. "The ball. You touched one of his toys. Shirva Tularin did the same thing. There wasn't enough of her left to show her husband. You should be dead," he said, half-accusingly.

Meisha shuddered. Her skin was unburned but red and raw, as if she'd stumbled through a bramble bush. "I'm protected- somewhat-against magical fire," she said, lifting a hand to touch her head. "I wish I could say the same fot blunt trauma." She looked up at Talal imploringly. "What happened to him? How did-"

"We don't know," Talal said. "He was like that when we found him, but worse-starved nearly to death, and sick. We brought him out of it, but his head's gone..." Talal still gazed at het suspiciously. "You believe me now? That thing isn't your teacher anymore, Lady."

"Then what is he?" Meisha snapped. "What has he become?"

Talal had a quick answer to that. "He's out doom."

CHAPTER 17

Keczulla, Amn 3 Marpenoth, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374DR)

"But of course the family stands happy to extend whatever assistance young Lord Morel may require, provided he understands the weight of the favors his father has already accrued."

"Your point is clearly taken, Lady." Kali bowed to the coldly smiling Lady Rothtes and continued his trek across the ballroom.

Absently, he scanned the second floor balcony for Cesira. She was nowhere in sight, but that was hardly a surprise. With its open view of the main ballroom, the second floor was a popular spot, and thus quite crowded.

Kail left the echoing chatter of the ballroom and crossed the dark gatden to the tower staiis. The double-arched windows of his fathei's former offices stood exactly as they had in Esmeltaran, though the current occupant of the tower hardly cared what view he had.

Sytek Dantane stood bent ovet a table, examining a book that was easily the length of his arm. The wizard had to shuffle a step left and fight to read the text.

"I'd love to see the bookshelf that came out of," Kail said by way of gfeeting.

The wizard did not immediately answer. When he did, he lifted only his eyes from the tome. They were as clear and as blue as Kail's, with a matching sheen of barely concealed hostility.

"I'm sure it would astound you. One actually has to read books on a regular basis to appreciate that knowledge comes in many forms."

Kail ignored the insult. "Surely you can agree inscribing a tome that's impossible to lift botders on the absutd?"

"Whatever you say, Lord Morel. In fact, I was just about to gathei my absurd bits of lore and be gone from your house."

Kali leaned against the doorframe. "I don't tecall asking you to leave. Could be my mind is slipping. We Motels are famous for our scattered wits, you know."

"As it happens, I do," Dantane said. "No, you haven't asked me to leave, but judging from the fact that you've avoided my requests for an audience since you came here, I'm assuming my eviction cannot be far off."

Kail shrugged. "You may be right. Eatlier today, I was going to throw you out without a conversation, but I changed my mind."

"What brought about that bit of charity?" "I have questions about my father."

Dantane gathered his robes about him, perching on the edge of the table. "Ask."

"When did you come to him?"

"Deepwinter. I was traveling through the city and ran into a bit of trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

Dantane looked irritated. "The kind that comes when ignorance is allowed too free a rein."

Kali smirked. "Amnians are quite vocal about their wizard-hatred, aren't they?" he said.

"Your father was able to intervene on my behalf, although why he took the trouble-"

"Is the mystery I'm most concerned with," Kail interrupted.

"My father hated magic more actively than most."

"So he took great pains to explain to me. Yet, he claimed a greater need drove him to hire me. He suspected someone close was using magic against him. He wished me to find the source."

Now Kail listened intently. "Did you?"

Dantane pushed away from the table. He strode to a locked cupboard in the corner and murmured something. A door creaked open, and Dantane reached inside, withdrawing an object that was unfamiliar to Kali: an ornate silver brooch set with a square, thumb-sized amethyst. "I removed this from your fathers person, though its magic was already drained to nothing."

"What is it?"

"Exactly what it appears, but your father's blood is on the pin. That blood bore traces of a subtle mind-altering magic. I've seen similar pieces before. The spells make a person extremely susceptible to suggestion, but only from those they trust- friends or family. For instance, if the lady of the house doesn't approve of the way her husband is using the family finances, instead of throwing a fuss, she can use this to influence him in new directions."

"But the lord would be unaffected in business dealings with enemies and rivals?" Kail asked.

"Precisely. Tailored to fit any Amnian merchant, wouldn't you say?"

"Indeed." So that was it, Kail thought. Magic had tainted his fathet's blood. "How did my father discover the spells affecting him?"

"He may have noticed when one ot both elements of the enchantment began to break down," Dantane said, "the spells... and his own mind."

Kali nodded. It made sense. Over time, the enchantment had slowly destroyed his father's sanity. He'd seen it that night in the gatden. "When my farher hired you, was he..."

"Lucid?" Dantane smiled sardonically. "He had stretches, long enough to keep his business scraping by. I could prolong some of them, with magic. Do you have any other inquiries, Lord Morel?" he asked impatiently, "or may I go?"

Kail considered the man. He knew what Cesira would say if she were here. Dantane was young, tidy with his speech and possessions, but with an unkempt ait about his person. His dark hair was too long and shaggy, his eyes perpetually jumpy and fatigued. And he was hungry, Kail thought. He'd watched the wizard poring over his books. The man was too eager for magic to have come willingly to a land so beteft of it. Kail had no doubt there was more to his reason for being here, but whethei it had anything to do with the Morel family was what he needed to know.

He knew what Cesira would say. Cesira would send Dantane away without hesitation.

•"I want you to watch the party," Kail said, surprising them both.

Dantane raised an eyebrow. "Watch it for what?"

Kail had no idea. "I have no mercenaries, no guards employed to see to the security of the house. You can act in that capacity."

Dantane hesitated. "Lord Morel, you claim a powerful druid as your companion-"

"Yes, but she's fairly intractable..."

"-so I fail to see what added benefit I can be."

"You're saying you don't want to continue to receive the impressive mound of coin my fathet paid?"

"I've seen your guest list, Lord Morel. It more resembles a creditor account. How long will you be

able to retain my services once this evening's festivities are concluded?"

Kail had no notion of that either. "Start with the party. We'll go from thete." On the heels of one problem settled, another occurred to Kail. He took out his mother's pouch, held the sttings, then tossed the pouch to Dantane.

The wizard caught it, a puzzled frown crossing his face. "What's this?"

"A task for after the party," Kail said. "Search its contents for any dangerous magic." He still didn't completely trust Meisha.

"And if I find some?" Dantane asked.

Kail paused at the top of the stairs. "Destroy it."

Later, Kail sat at his father's desk, his arms folded behind his head as he listened to the muffled sounds of the party going on outside the study. He was still sitting when the door opened, and Lord Marstil Greve stepped inside.

Lord Greve was a handsome man just entering middle years, but his muscles had begun to soften. He wore a jeweled knife at his belt, inset with two gems-one a ruby in a nest of gold, the other a glimmering emerald.

"Lord Morel? I believe we had an appointment," said Marstil.

"My apologies, Lord Greve," Kail said, coming around the desk to offer his hand. "My mind was

consumed by other thoughts-old memories."

The merchant nodded. "Understandable. It must be strange to come home after so long an absence. My sympathies on your father's death, he was-"

"Suicide," Kail corrected.

Marstil blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"My father took his own life," Kali repeated pleasantly. "In this study, as a matter of fact."

Marstil appeared extremely uncomfortable. "I hope you don't mind my speaking with you privately, Lord Morel... and speaking plainly," he added, watching Kail's face.

"Not at all."

"Being newly arrived in Keczulla, I'm sure you're unaware that among the merchants of the city, my family is growing in prominence, though we do not have the history associated with the Tanisloves, the Bladesmiles... or the Morels." Marstil paused, waiting for Kali to comment. When he was met by bland silence, he continued, "Yet, I have been given to undetstand that the house of Morel has suffered from..." he paused again, and Kail almost smiled. Marstil was searching for a delicate way to say that Morel was a coin toss away from destitution.

Kali saved him the trouble. "Motel would be foolish to ignore an offer of alliance, should it be extended," he said, and Marstil immediately relaxed. "Since we're speaking plainly, I confess my circumstances are such that I'm finding it difficult to pay the daily

expenses of a house of Motel's stature, even so far as to be unable to pay the servants' wages or-" he stopped, as if afraid he'd said too much.

"How unfortunate." Marstil's eyes gleamed. He knew he would have the uppet hand in theit negotiations. "The outcome of this meeting will greatly affect us both, then."

"Oh, I'm certain of it," Kail said. He poured a pair of drinks from a decanter on his desk. He handed one to MarstiL "Of coutse, it hasn't been tetribly difficult to get by, considering my circumstances. Few servants remained at Morel house, even during my father's time. They were all slaughtered by assassins, you see."

The glass stopped halfway to the merchant's mouth. Amber liquid sloshed on his fingers.

"Oh, excuse me, my lord," said Kali. "I filled the glass too full. Allow me to fetch you a towel."

"Yes, thank you," Marstil murmured.

Kali opened a drawer in the desk. He tossed a black cloth to Matstil. The merchant caught it absently, and was wiping his fingers before he realized what he held. He unrolled the silk hood and let it fall between his hands, revealing two crudely cut eyeholes.

"It's not the original, I realize," said Kali. "But it matches my memories closely. What do you think, Lord Greve?"

Marstil dropped the mask and spun toward Kail in one lightning movement. His arm came around, taking the decantet off the desk. Kail dodged, and glass shattered against the wall. Marstil went for the knife at his belt, but Kali locked a hand around his wrist.

"Did you think I wouldn't find you?" he asked, his pleasant tone unchanged. "That I wouldn't know you as soon as I saw your blade? You're a fool, Marstil, a dead fool."

Marstil struggled, but he'd spent too many years away from hard fighting, and Kail was no longer a stripling boy. He held the man without breaking a sweat.

Kali eased the knife from Marstil's sheath and laid it against the merchant's throat, starting at the eat.

"Shall I give you the same death you gave het?" Kail asked. He waited for the man to answer, to plead, but saw only fear and confusion in Marstil's eyes. The bastard didn't even remember the ones he'd killed. "Gertie never saw her death coming, but you will. I'll savor that time, and the pain, until I'm ready to let you go, unless you tell me where Balram is."

"I-I have no idea." Marstil's eyes flicked to the mask and back to Kail's face. There was no lie in them, only terror. "Kortiun and I parted company long ago, when I set out to build my business. Please... listen," he said. "I h-have not been Balram's man... in years," he stammeted, swallowing against the steel at his throat. "I am a merchant now. I've made a family."

"A family," Kail echoed. "Oh, dear. That's the death card, is it? Now I'm required to have metcy." He leaned in close to the man's face. "Tell me, Marstil, do youi wife and children know how their father earned his fortune? Do they realize the manse they sleep in at night was paid for with Morel blood? If I tell them that, after I've killed you, do you think they'll forgive me? I like to believe they will." Kail pressed down, and Marstil shrieked. "What else have you got to offer me, Marstil? Please, don't mention your family to me again."

"All that I have!" The merchant trembled as a drop of blood ran down the knife's blade into his field of vision. "Whatevet you want!"

Slowly, Kali eased the knife away and lifted something in front of Marstil's eyes.

The merchant focused on Gertie's gold medallion, flecked with old blood. "Wh-what is that?"

"The symbol of our new alliance," Kail answered, putting the chain around Marstil's neck. "Your commitment to the service of Morel. The house of Greve is now the benefactor of Morel's servants. They will be paid generously from its coffers, for the whole of their lives, whether they stay with Motel or not, whethet the house thrives or burns to the ground. And upon their deaths, every guard, maid, cook, and steward will be buried with the highest honoi at Greve's expense. It's not so large a thing to ask, in exchange for your life. Don't you agree?

Marstil nodded wordlessly.

"Most importantly, you will weai this medallion always, •Marstil," Kail said, in a voice of quiet menace. "If ever I see you've taken it off, I will take off your head. You may be assured I will enjoy that far more than I enjoy letting you live."

He stepped back. Marstil fled the study, taking Lathander's sun and leaving his jeweled blade.

Kali followed him out into the ballroom. A lady standing nearby scuttled aside to avoid colliding with the running merchant. She watched his retreating back in consternation.

Kail swept up to her and bowed grandly. "Lady Tanislove," he said, smiling his most charming smile, the one that never worked on Cesira, "might I request a dance?"

"Try this one," Laerin suggested, snagging a flute of a br uise-colored liquid from a passing tray. "If you sip it with a bite of cheese, the flavor becomes blueberry tart." He sipped and chewed thoughtfully. "Uncanny."

Morgan wedged a morsel of cheese between his cheek and jaw and took a gulp of wine. "Save a lot of trouble if you just eat the tart." He wrinkled his nose. "Probably tastes better, too."

"Yes, but you have to get in the spirit of things," Laerin chided him. "Tethyrian Blueberry Blush is much more expensive."

"Silly name too." Morgan's eyes were on the crowd. "Didn't know you were a wine snob."

"I am a man of many tastes and talents."

"Good thing shovelin's near the top of the list, cause you're knee-deep in sh-"

"Zzar," Laerin cooed, reaching for another tray.

"Careful!" Morgan grabbed a fistful of the half-elfs hair, hauling it and the rest of his friend behind one of the ballroom's marble statues.

"Morgan, why are we hiding, and do I happen to have any hair left, or did you take it all?" Laerin asked calmly.

"Shut it." Morgan pointed across the ballroom, where Kail strode along on the arm of a lady in a green silk gown with fine silver chains encircling her arms from shoulder to wrist. The woman lifted het lips to Kail's ear to whispet something that made him chuckle.

Morgan shook his head. "That'll get him a punch in the bowels-two silver on it."

Laerin sighed. "Cesita would never maim him for flirting with Lhynvor Tanislove. The lady has more sense than that."

Well said. Cesira's arm slid companionably around Laerin's waist, accompanied by a scent that was both flower and herb, exotic and completely removed from the heavily perfumed bodies in the ballroom. I don't believe you flattering idiots were on the guest list.

"Ten families seemed a modest number for a welcome home party," said Laerin. "What harm is there in adding two more guests?"

"We didn't come in under 'flattering idiots,' " Morgan grinned. "We're in disguise."

"Obviously, it's wotking well," Laerin said dtyly, but he sobered quickly enough. "We're here to keep eyes on Kail."

"Too many debt-collectors in the room," said Morgan.

Laerin looked at her askance. "Surely you don't object?"

Not at all, Cesira said. But Kail will-with fervor. I welcome you, so long as you stay silent and invisible.

"Not two of Motgan's greatet talents, but we'll do our best," Laerin assured her. He took a step back, surveying the druid's gown. A wide belt at her waist gatheted layets of skirts in subtle shades of earthen red. Worked into the belt's dark leather was the figure of an oak leaf, the symbol of Silvanus. Slashed sleeves tevealed tanned arms and matching leather bands encircling each of her wrists. "I'll say this, since I'm certain Kali hasn't thought to," the half-elf said, "these fine Amnian frill-lovers have nothing on you, Lady of Mir."

Cesira inclined her head to hide her smile. My thanks, O flattering idiot.

Laerin laughed. "How fares the Lady Morel?"

Her eyes on the swirling crowd, Cesira did not immediately teply. Hired minsttels-she had no idea where Kail had found them-had begun a circle dance, which had drawn many of the guests from the balcony to line up in colorful half-moons across the floor. They were all smiles and good-natured jesting on the surface, but Cesita knew why the merchants were here. They wanted to see if Kali could hold his own among them.

Everything in Amn was a test, a measurement of investment and potential gain. If Kail's manner and surroundings showed promise, the merchant families would give him time to pay the debts of his father. That's why Cesira had agreed to serve in the role of the lady of the house, however much it galled her. She had no intention of letting the wolves eat Kail alive.

She'd directed the servants in gutting and cleaning the house with the same thoroughness she displayed when scourging an army of goblins. The results may not have rivaled the Tanislove estate, but there would be no chink in Morel's armor from this front.

Have you watched them? she asked, nodding to the dancing throng.

"Glaring peacocks, the lot," Morgan said dismissively. "No." Laerin shook his head. "She means the merchant families."

"What of em?"

"They announced them at the door, each according to his station," said Laerin. "I watched them

separate immediately, almost as if they couldn't stand to be in each other's company."

Morgan nodded sagely. "Reminds me of my family."

"It's what they prefer you to think. Look." Laerin pointed with his glass to a group of women gathered near the staircase. Their ornate tutbans shimmered with glitter dust and bobbed together like a star storm with the force of the women's back and forth whispering. "The younger lass, standing at the edge of the crowd-she's Seyana Veshpel, a niece of Lord Uskan Veshpel-patriarch of his house. I saw her announced last in het family. See how she's tteated as such?"

Yet that youngest Veshpel, said Cesira, so innocently lingering at the edge of the group, stands less than a whip crack from her father, and he from his wife, and she from-

"Lord Uskan," Morgan said, seeing the pattern emerge.

"So it goes with every family," said Laerin. "A living chain to see and hear everything in the room. Whatever their personal rivalries, good business benefits the whole family."

"Forced loyalty," Morgan muttered, shaking his head. "One of Morel's fine emeralds says in private they're one wrong word from slaughtering each other." He raised a fist, showing thtee of the Morel emerald and stone symbols between his fingets.

"Where did you pick those up?" asked Laerin, affronted. "I only received one."

Cesira rolled her eyes. As did everyone at the party, she said.

"Oh, wait, here's another," Laerin added. He smirked, drawing a handful of glittering green from his pouch.

Wonderful, Cesira muttered. Now, would you care to point out which ladies you lifted them from, or shall I wait until one of them gives me a look of horror when I try to speak to her?

Morgan pointed to a woman whose dress was a configuration of red silk scarves fastened in her hair and looping outwards, wrapping down around all the vital pottions of her lithe body. "She was definitely one of them."

Thank you, the druid sighed. I think I can divine the others on my own.

Cesira slipped away to join Kali just as Lady Tanislove left him.

He's here-Lord Rays, she told him. He arrived while you were with Marstil.

"Is he still coherent?" Barely.

"Wonderful. He'll be much more open to my proposal."

Cesira tapped a slender finger against her chin. Now, would that be another business venture, my lord, or the systematic murder of Bladesmile mercenaries? I do get the two confused, you know.

"The latter," Kail said dtyly, "but I only intend to mutder the ones who prove uncooperative."

You still think one of them will be able to lead you to Balram?

"Somebody knows," said Kail darkly.

As he statted to walk away, Cesira took his arm. Relax, Kail, she said. The Morel name demands the merchants treat you as an equal, no matter the breadth of your debt. You have the manner and skills to fit in their world.

For some reason, the compliment made Kail wince. "What little talent I have comes from my father, and his father before." He grinned. "I'd rather you praised me on my skill with a sword, which you rarely do."

Oh, but I disagree. You make a fine adventurer-a talent inherited from your mother, no doubt, Cesira remarked lightly, waving and smiling at a lady across the room.

Kail sighed, thinking it wiser to ignore the path the conver-sation was taking. "Where is Rays?"

Cesira pointed across the ballroom to where a man swayed drunkenly against one of the matble statues. He used the brief loss of dignity to make lewd pantomimes with the statue and his body, much to the horror of a group of passing ladies.

The Bladesmiles are among the most powerful and respected families in Keczulla and greater Amn. Why does this one play the fool? Cesira asked absently.

"His wife died," Kali said, drawing the druid's gaze and a noise of sympathy. "A year ago. He cares nothing for status and position now."

Then perhaps Lord Rays has more wisdom than us all. Cesira watched Kail cross the ballroom, weaving purposely among his guests, on to the next stage of his plan.

Suddenly uneasy and feeling eyes upon her, Cesira looked up at the balcony and met the clear blue gaze of Syrek Dantane.

CHAPTER 18

Keczulla, Amn 3 Marpenoth, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

Dantane inclined his head respectfully to the druid. Her eyes registered surprise, but she concealed it quickly. So Morel hadn't told her he was here. Dantane wondered why. If Morel distrusted him so thoroughly, wouldn't he wish to have the eyes of those he did ttust tracking him constantly?

The wizard took a step toward the stairs, when the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end as silent magical wards hummed. The spell was not powerful, but the relative lack of magic in the room made it seem stronger-akin to tolling a bell in a tomb. Had this been a gala in Waterdeep, the resonant hum would have been lost in the greater cacophony of minor cantrips and protective spells.

Dantane looked to the dais. A young woman had stepped forward with a lute. She sang in a deep, pleasing alto, an unremarkable song, but she livened up the show by pausing in the middle of a verse to tell bawdy jokes or humorous stories, always deftly picking up the tune exactly where she'd left off. The crowd gathered, laughing, at the edge of the dais to listen.

Dantane's eyes fixed on the lute. The bard's instrument, or something inside it, was the source of the magic-an illusion, possibly glamour to conceal some defect on the patt of the singer. Dantane

scanned the crowd for Morel, wondering if he should inform the young lord.

When Dantane spied him, Kail was still speaking to the drunken man. The wizard headed for the stairs, but halted when he saw Kail's face blanch. Dantane traced the room, seeking a threat, but Morel simply stood, as frozen as one of the statues, staring at a spot beneath the balcony. He said something to the drunkard and stepped away.

Fascinated, Dantane watched him walk across the ballroom like a man caught sleepwalking out of a dream. Whatever Morel saw disturbed him greatly, Dantane thought. He couldn't describe all the emotions that passed ovet Kail's face, but the still, ravaged look, the vulnerability-that interested Dantane, so much so he forgot the lute player and her song.

"Seven-there it is!" The serving table quivered as Morgan slammed his handful of emerald-stone clusters in front of Laerin. "That you can't beat."

The half-elf flashed him a lazy smile. "Datling, must we compete? It's unseemly."

Morgan turned purple, clenching his fists as if he might. cram the stones down Laerin's throat. "Empty yout pockets. Turn em out, or by the gods I'll do it for you!"

Laerin fluttered his lashes. "Now you're just being saucy."

Morgan took a step forward, reaching for a weapon.

"Oh, all right." The half-elf sighed and emptied a pouch of stones next to Morgan's pile.

"Only six!" Morgan spouted triumphantly, as Cesira looked on with an expression of helpless bemusement.

Laerin raised a hand to either side of Morgan's head, and with a flourish produced two more stones from the man's haity ears. "Your pardon," the half-elf said.

Morgan swatted his hands away, fuming. "Ptetty-faced whore's brat-"

Quiet! Cesira hissed. Hide yourselves. Kail is… As she looked, she realized Kail wasn't headed their way. He'd stopped, frozen next to the drunken Bladesmile. At first Cesira thought he was listening to the bard, but then she saw him staring at something through the crowd.

I've never seen that look, she murmured. She traced Kail's stunned gaze across the room to a corner, where a man stood leaning sedately against a marble column. He ignored the rest of the room, and appeared to be listening intently to the lute player. Broken from whatever spell had smote him, Kail began walking directly toward the man.

"I've seen it," Laerin spoke up, a frown creasing his smooth forehead. "When I first met Kail, he had the same look."

Morgan nodded agreement. "Like he just lost his best friend."

Cesira paled, gripping Laerin's arm. Aazen, she whispered.

"Greetings, Lord Morel," said Aazen, as Kali came to stand between him and the dais. He offered Kail one of his rare, genuine smiles. "It is good to see you again."

Kali was at a loss. The man before him was older- and leaner, if possible-than the boy who'd been his best friend. His datk hair was short and shaved. He dressed in black leathers with a cloak of silky midnight blue thrown over one shoulder. The armor was stained, but the cloak pristine"-a halfhearted attempt to blend with the throng. Despite the changes, he was still Aazen-a quiet, shadowed young man. Kail had imagined many fates befalling his best friend in the years since their last meeting, but seeing the man grown, greeting him here in his father's house, had never been among them.

When Kali temained silent, Aazen said, "You don't recognize me? I can't blame you. It's been a long while since we spoke."

"Aazen," Kali said, recovering himself. "You haven't changed so much. You were always more adult than child."

Aazen considered. "Yes, I suppose you're right. Are you well, Kail?"

"Well enough, but more than a little shocked to see you here."

"You've been looking for me?" "Ever since I returned," said Kali.

"Most of Amn thought you dead," Aazen said. "But I doubted it."

Kali grunted. "Thanks. You had more confidence than I did, considering the condition I was in when we parted."

"Yet here you stand, in your house reclaimed."

"Such as it is. Aazen, you know I'm after Balram," said Kali bluntly.

"Of coutse. I'd be disappointed if you weten't, especially after that passionate speech you gave at our last meeting," said Aazen sardonically. "Have you enjoyed any success in your search?"

"You know I haven't."

"Unfortunately, I don't. My father and I parted company some time ago."

"Oh?" Kali didn't bother to hide his disbelief. "When you left, you seemed bent on staying by his side, in spite of everything. 'Don't come after him,' you said. 'I'll have to kill you, if you do.' "

"I was a child. I didn't know what I wanted." Aazen searched his eyes. "Can you grant me that, Kail? Can you believe I may have found other companions, as you have, or do you think I'll say anything to protect him?"

"I don't know," Kail said. "But I never held any hope or desire to get at Balram through you. I only prayed he hadn't killed you."

"But think, if you'd found me dead, you would have had yet another reason to slay him."

Kali didn't comment. There was too much tension in the room already. "If you can stay long enough, I'd like to introduce you to my companions," he said, changing the subject.

"I've heard many whispers about the beauty of the Lady Morel," said Aazen. "You've done well for yourself, even without my constant looking after you."

"Yes, Cesira is a beauty, and were she mine, I'm sure my manhood would be subjugated to her will within a tenday," Kali said, laughing. "Luckily for me, her affections ate not settled on me."

"Aren't they?" Aazen seemed surprised. "Then why-"

"She's playing the part of my wife until affairs here settle down," Kali explained. "Two other friends are looking out for my physical well-being. I'm sure we can find them if we look. They haven't managed to conceal themselves all evening-I don't see why they should start now."

A terrific crash from the dais had both men turning, their hands straying to theit swotd hilts in a mirrored gestute. The lute playet had apparently decided to finish het tune with a flourish, smashing het instf ument against the floor. The startled crowd backed away as she crouched to gather the broken bits.

"Lovely," Kail murmured. "The musicians have obviously taken more than theit share of spirits fot

the evening. Excuse me, old friend."

The crowd blocked his path, but Kail could see the woman clearly. She knelt in the center of the stage, cradling a mass of what appeared to be mud and protruding roots that she'd hidden inside the lute. Her gaze was feverishly bright as she stared at the mass.

A wave of ttepidation swept over Kail. He was no wizard, but he knew the effects of mind magic all too well. He pushed through the crowd, shouting, "Everyone, stand back! Dantane!"

Shocked gasps rang out as the woman began shoveling the strange mass into het mouth. She swallowed and immediately began to choke, the mass lodging grotesquely in her throat.

Black veins speared out beneath het skin, spreading from her windpipe to her shoulders and up her face. Her tan skin bulged, turning purple-black as her head lolled to one side.

A woman in the crowd screamed and fainted. People tripped and fell over her in their tush to get away. Kail found a gap and jumped onto the dais, his swotd raised.

"Laerin!" he shouted.

The half-elf appeared below him, lifting the senseless guest over his shoulder. Morgan stood across the room, herding the crowd to the exit. "We'll get em out," Morgan assured Kali. "Cesira's coming."

"Find Dantane!" Kail's gaze remained fixed on the grim transformation unfolding on the dais.

The lute player's flesh rippled and shimmered like a heat mirage, her form lengthening and filling out into that of a young man with shoulder-length brown hair and finely tailored clothing. Kail could not tell his identity, for the black blemish remained on his face and continued to spread, exploding up from the flesh of his arms, legs, and torso as boils and bleeding wounds. He seemed to be filling up everywhere, and the strange, oozing black substance had nowhere to go but through his skin and vital organs.

The thing that had been human lurched up to its legs and swiped with a too-long arm at Kail's face. Kali raised his sword and felt the blade sink into the ooze. The creature howled and pulled back, leaving a ttail of black gore that sizzled into the wooden platform.

"Tarshz mephran!" came a shout from the balcony, and a spray of electricity yanked the hairs on Kail's arms. Bolts of energy ripped into the creature, spraying black blood in all directions.

Kali jumped back, cursing as drops hit his exposed arm and burned.

Dantane climbed onto the balcony tail and floated to the ballroom floor, his robes flaring at the sleeves as his hands shaped anothet spell. He aimed the Aft directly over Kail's head at the cteature. Kali dived behind a harpsichord, pulling its heavy bench over onto its side as a shield when the spell erupted.

Bolts of ice burrowed from Dantane's palms, then streaked across the toom to impale the oozing mass. Gore sprayed the bench, burning black pockmarks into the wood.

Kail rolled to his feet behind the creature. He hacked at it, the emerald sword finding flesh that was human and monster and sometimes a bizarre hybrid. The blade penetrated, and what was left of the lute player's voice rang out in screeches of pure agony.

A tentacled arm whipped out from where the woman's stomach had been, catching Kail in the midsection. The blow threw Kail back; he smelled melted leather He fumbled at his armor buckles, flinching when he felt hands come around him from behind. Fingers pressed flush against the acidic burning.

"Get back!" roared Kail when he recognized Cesira's chanting voice. Damn her, the last thing he wanted was for her to be acid-seated while protecting him.

Steam rose in a cloud, hissing and stinging Kail's eyes, but the burning sensation eased. The druid touched the base of his neck, and Kali felt a faint, humming tingle spread across his skin. It lingered in his ears like the last thtum of a fading song. Silently, Cesira drew away to stand beside him.

You'll have protection from the acid, she told him, for a time. She cocked her head, listening to Dantane's chants, watching the measured release of power. Go now!

Trusting her, Kail charged in under another rain of bolts, but they seemed targeted only to the creature and sailed harmlessly around him. Tentacles burst at random from the creature's hips and groin-Kail hacked them off, forming a buffer for Dantane and Cesira.

"Kail!" Dantane's voice was thick with magic. "The root in its throat-carve it out. Destroy it!"

Kail risked a glance at the throng retreating from the ballroom. A few stragglers had stayed behind-Lord Rays among them-to watch the horrific spectacle.

Kail yelled to Cesira. "Don't let them see!" The last thing he wanted was for the merchants to witness him butchering the girl, even if she no longer resembled anything human. He waded into the mass of tentacles as the druid backed down the dais's steps, chanting a familiar spell and arching her arms above her head.

The air immediately grew thick and moist. Dense fog billowed from the portal of Cesira's arms, curling around the dais in a concealing bubble that hid Kail, Dantane, and the creature from view.

Behind the vapor wall, Kail wedged his sword in the harpsichord bench and grabbed blindly at the creature with his gloved hands, trusting Cesira's protective spell to hold long enough for him to finish his grim task. He punched into the thing's mouth and felt teeth and tongue give way with a wet crunch.

Kali fought down a rush of bile. Whatever shape it took now, the thing still had a woman's head, and

Kail had just rendered it a ruin. Steeling himself, he bore down, ignoring the choking and mewling sounds coming from the monster. When his hand met an obstruction, Kail didn't allow himself to think. He yanked the mass of mud and root straight up.

The creature's head disintegrated around his arm. Kail lurched backward, hurling the root ball across the dais. It landed, writhing, at Dantane's boots.

"Kill it," Kail growled.

Dantane wavered. His eyes followed the movements of the dozens of tendrils branching off the mass, each quivering with something arcane.

"Dantane!" Kali shouted.

The wizard flinched, stirred from his trance. He pointed to the mass and muttered something. Flames erupted from the root ball, consuming it in a flash of blue light and searing heat. Dantane raised his sleeve against the glare and stink. "Done," he said.

Kail strode to the bench, yanked his sword free, and kept moving until the point threatened to slice Dantane's nose in half. "If not for Cesira, I'd be smoking on the floor next to that thing. Mind telling me why you tried to get me killed?"

Breathing heavily, Dantane matched the furious lord's stare.

"I was fighting to prevent the creature from tearing your guests apart. If you've a problem with my methods-"

Kali interrupted, "You've as well as told the whole of Keczulla I'm hiding a wizard under my skirts!"

Dantane hesitated. Something that might have been chagrin came and went across his sweat-soaked face. "I'm not accustomed to fighting under these circumstances," he stammered. "As to the rest"-his white lips thinned-"had I intended you harm, Lord Morel, rest assured, your head would now be in as many pieces as that unfortunate creature."

Kail's grip on his sword tightened, but Dantane didn't back down. "Pethaps you would like me to discern the woman's-or man's-identity?" The wizatd's voice sounded smug. "It might prove useful, even vital, to have such information at hand when the Gem Guard come calling about this incident."

From somewhere outside the fog, Morgan's voice rumbled, "Two red inks say he skewers him."

"No bet, I can't see his face," was Laerin's reply.

Kail lingered over the raised steel a moment longer. Abruptly, he sheathed his sword, his eyes still spearing Dantane with hostility. He kicked at the harpsichord bench and jumped off the dais.

The sttagglers had gone. Aazen had gone. Kail hadn't seen him leave with the crowd. "Close off the estate," he ordered the servants who'd dated remain within earshot. "Let no one back in except the guard, whenever they turn up." He had no doubt they would. Dantane was right, damn the man again. He had to find out who the lute playet was and why she-or he-had turned up at the party with deadly magic.

Could it have been one of the families, attempting to strike at him? It seemed ludicrous, considering theit aversion to magic and the tumors flying all evening about his generous-bordering-on-desperate attempts to make restitution among the merchants.

Attempts that might come to nothing after tonight, Kail thought. Futy spiked through him. Amn's retribution for magic use, especially magic that murdered, was second only to the collection of debts among the merchant families. He was about to be buried deep in trouble of both sorts.

CHAPTER 19

The Howling Delve 4 Marpenoth, the

Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

This was a great idea," Talal said sarcastically as he held the torch around Meisha's body.

The Harper turned, flames catching in her eyes. Talal flinched. "Are you really going to walk at my heel with that thing, or can I caRry it?"

"My torch, Lady," Talal said, holding it out of reach. "Then would you care to lead?" She pointed down the dark, unfamiliar passage.

"I'd care to go back to the warrens!" he complained, handing her the brand. "I showed you the wizard. Haroun says that's enough, and she doesn't even know he tried to kill you."

"You told me your people explore these caves constantly, looking for ways to escape."

"I told you we draw lots for the pleasure," Talal argued. "Stain one stone with berry juice, put the rest in a sack, and choose. Tymora's lucky whipping boy gets a torch, a weapon, and a trip down the tunnel to have his wits smashed all over the place. That's what happened to Gadi."

"He was killed?" Meisha shone the torch down a side passage and listened. She heard nothing but the distant, constant drip of water. When she'd lived here, Varan had always made his apprentices safe,

no matter how dangerous the Delve could be. Now the apprentices were dead, and Varan…

Meisha suppressed a shudder. Varan had become one of the threats in the dark.

"Smashed, I said. By whatever roams the tunnels outside your wizatd's shields," said Talal.

"Varan warned us not to venture outside the wards. Even I don't know what lies at the end of many of these tunnels," Meisha admitted. "You say you've sent someone out already?"

"Braedrin," Talal said, nodding. "Hasn't come back yet. Smash," he mutmured under his breath.

"What are these matks?" Meisha pointed to the walls.

"Tells us where people have been," Talal explained. "Means no traps, either."

"Traps," Meisha echoed. A mask of blood and a dead apprentice's face flashed before her eyes.

"Don't know who swung 'em, but they'te all over the place. We lost two that way when we fitst started going out. Ptessute spears. Hit you square, one'll take your head clean off. More of Lady Luck's favor, the well-meaning bitch."

Meisha raised an eyebrow. "You've a ready insult for all the gods. Which one do you actually like?"

The boy shrugged, dislodging a scuttling beetle from his clothing. "None of them-easiet that way."

"You don't believe in the gods?"

"Believe, yes. But I leave them be, and I wish they'd return the favor." He flicked away the beetle. "Not so much to ask."

"What about after this life? Don't you worry for your soul?"

"Hells, no. I'm aiming to live forever. See how I avoid prancing down dark tunnels with death-seeking sotcetets? I get along fine, Lady; it's the rest of Faerun that wants to muck me up."

"How many of you are there in the warrens?" Meisha asked, shifting the topic.

The boy spent a moment figuring. "Thirty-eight. We took count of everyone, after the first death, so we'd know names. Forty-nine came into the caves, not counting that bastard Balram and his son."

Meisha stopped short. "The man who trapped you here was Balram?"

"Him and his son, Aazen-not so twitchy as his father, but quiet, scary quiet," Talal said. "Never said more than a few words to any of us."

Aazen. She remembered the name from the cave. The leader who'd stabbed her was Balram's son. Meisha tried to take it all in. She pressed her hand against the crystal hidden in her jerkin. She'd almost forgotten it, but now its presence in the hands of Balram's man made perfect, terrible sense.

"I never knew there was a son," Meisha said. "I only knew Kortrun."

Talal's eyes widened. "You knew em?"

"I've been searching for Balram Kortrun on behalf of a friend." Meisha resumed walking, and after a moment Talal ran to catch up. "They were refugees with you?" Meisha asked.

"We fled Esmeltaran together," said Talal. "When we took up here, Balram-like I said, he was always twitchy-didn't like the Delve or the crazy wizard. We couldn't figure out why he kept going back to the wizard's room, though, if he was so afraid. He'd come out some nights, looking almost sick with whatever he'd seen. Finally, he took his son, said he'd go for help to Keczulla. We all thought he was crazy, but we let him go. No one said so, but we hoped they might make it. We were too damn scared to go with them." Talal stared off into the darkness, thinking. "I guess we're paying for that, too. If we hadn't been cowards, we wouldn't still be here. Ifwe'd've woken up and seen how it wasn't the wizard but the wizard's toys he was interested in..."

"But they did make it to Keczulla," Meisha prompted.

"And came back with the Shadow Thieves. What a rescue," said Talal sourly. "They made us take the wizard's toys from his room while he slept, then they sealed the enttance to the Delve, trapped us inside. Told us if we took cate of the old man, let him be to make his magic toys, they'd come back to collect them. When they came, they'd bring food-meat to

butcher, chickens for eggs-clothing, maybe some weapons, if we didn't tty to escape-everything we'd need to live."

"So you cate for Varan, keep him fed and strong enough to make magic items, and in exchange they give you this existence." Meisha marveled at the complexity of the system, but in reality, the risks and costs to the Shadow Thieves wete minimal. What was feeding forty people when compared to the worth of magic weapons, amulets, rings… whatever Varan could conceive of in his current state? "You'ie certain it's the Shadow Thieves?"

"They didn't bother hiding it," Talal said. "We didn't know how they even got in at fitst, until Gadi ttacked them to the doorways. We ttied to work them. Gadi said they used some type of key that wasn't a key-he got close enough to see that much."

"Gadi was very brave," Meisha observed.

"My brother." Pride swelled in Talal's eyes, and Meisha's heart twisted. "Runs in the family: brave, stupid-pick one."

They entered a large chamber. Meisha shone the torch high, but the light refused to penetrate to the ceiling.

"I'm going to cast a spell," Meisha said. When Talal didn't answer, she looked at him questioningly. "Is that a problem?"

"No, just… not used to being asked, is all." Talal barked a laugh, but Meisha could sense the unease behind his btavado.

"I'll try to be gentle." Meisha lowered the torch, fisting her hands into the flames. "Mephhisden,"she hissed.

File wound languidly around her fingers and upward into a nairow, twisting column, a length of hemp weaving itself from the air currents. Near the ceiling, it tapered off to a needle point of fire that illuminated the cavern's ceiling and the corpse impaled upon one of the stalactites. Its aims and legs dangled in a spiderlike pose above their heads.

"Braedrin," Talal murmured, recognizing the man's vacant stare. "Pinned, not smashed," he corrected himself.

Meisha wedged the torch between two close stones. The column of fire sparked and twisted, illuminating a pair of over-large shadows with long, triangular tails hovering around the body. "Dragazhars," Meisha said, watching them scatter from the light. "Watch your head."

Talal immediately dropped into a crab crouch, his eyes on the leathery cloaks of the deep bats-night hunters, Meisha noted-which billowed out like dark sails a full seven feet across the cavern's ceiling.

Talal shuddered. "They wasn't what stuck him on that spear."

"No," Meisha agreed. "I'd have to see the body up close to know what killed him."

Unexpectedly, Talal said. "I can get it down."

"The walls are sheer," Meisha pointed out. "Unless you have rope hidden somewhere under that mainsail of a garment..."

In answer, Talal pulled a balled up object from under his shirt. Meisha recognized the waterskin the halfling had used and discarded when the Shadow Thieves escaped through the portal. Talal had twisted and flattened the bladder until a small bulge of the magical substance had collected around the mouth. "I've been waiting to try this," Talal said.

Meisha blinked at him. "What about the bats? A moment ago you were terrified of them."

"You'll kill them if they come near me." Talal glanced up from smearing his dirty toes. He appeared hopeful. "Won't you?

Meisha eyed the floating bats, calculating. "If you insist," she said finally.

Talal stood, balancing on his heels. He trotted clumsily to the cavern wall and placed his bare palms on the stone. He shifted his weight, drawing himself up to his toes and holding the position until he was satisfied the substance would support his weight. Grunting, he hauled himself up the sheer stone wall, moving much faster than the halfling and his comrades had dared.

Meisha kept her eyes on the night hunters as Talal scuttled across the ceiling to the body. He stopped and freed his arms to dangle upside down, using his swinging momentum to carry him to the stalactite. He grabbed the stone tip protruding through the unfortunate Braedrin's chest and hung on with one

hand. The other he positioned at the man's back and pushed, grimacing as the corpse slid off the stone into the crook of his arm.

The weight was too much, even for the magic. Reluctantly, Talal let the body fall away into space. Braedrin hit the floor with a loose thud, his arms and legs caught clumsily beneath him. Talal pumped his legs, swinging up to grab the ceiling again. Blood dripped from the stalactite, and the bats began to stir.

Talal turned, heading back toward the wall. The bats glided in a narrow circle and went for him at the same time.

Meisha was waiting. She stroked a hand over the flame column, her eyes widening as if she awoke to a lover's touch. Her irises became rings of fire as she envisioned the shaping, how to use the raw power within her to sculpt the spell.

A pair of arrows-each as long as her forearm-burst - from the twisting column and streaked toward Talal. The boy shrieked and ducked his head, but the flame arrows veered away from him to impale the bats. Leather wings caught fire and fell from the air. The bats' tails whipped uselessly against the ground. Meisha watched them smolder as the light died out of her eyes.

Blinking, she felt herself come out of the grip of the magic as Talal dropped down beside her. A ghost of the expression he'd worn earlier-as he watched Varan play with his toy-passed over his face when he looked at Meisha.

The Harper felt a wave of regret. The boy had lived in Amn all his life, and had probably never seen or cared to see Art such as this. "Please don't be frightened," she said, trying to smile. "It's not so worlds-shaking terrible as it all seems."

Talal squatted next to Braedrin's body, his back to her. "Don't they all say that?" he muttered.

He started to say something else, but a tentacle roped him from above, jerking his head to one side.

"Talal!" Meisha bit back the spell that instinctively jumped to mind. She followed the tentacle to the corner, between two rock outcroppings, where a mass of gray, mottled flesh writhed.

With a gestute, Meisha cast the flame rope in the direction of the surrounding stone. The creature wailed at the brightness but did not loosen its grip on the boy.

Braedrin's fate, Meisha thought. A choker, by all the gods, and it had a decent grip.

Talal's eyes bulged as his throat disappeared under layers of spongy flesh. The choker flexed muscles that had no clear definition, trying to yank the boy off his feet, but Talal dug in, the sticky substance keeping him tooted in place.

Looping one atm around the tentacle, Meisha prepared to cast anothet spell. If she could heat the thing's flesh sufficiently, the pain would make it release the boy. She'd used the same spell to try to escape from Kali, long ago. Somehow, she didn't

believe the choker would be as tenacious as the merchant's son.

Het hands began to glow with the weight of the spell. Heat rose to bathe her face and she heard Talal's choked whimpering.

She looked to the boy, afraid she might be too late. Talal's panic-stticken eyes met het own, and Meisha tealized he was afraid of the heat. He was choking to death, but he feared her magic more.

Meisha hesitated, then released the spell on a muttered curse. She drew a dagger from her boot. The ropey tentacle was too thick to slice in half, so she brought the steel down oveihand into its soft flesh. The choket writhed, releasing its prey and scuttling back.

Talal collapsed on the ground, clutching his throat, and bats poured from a hollow in the upper corner of the chamber.

The light from the flame rope faltered as bats-not as large as the first two, but still impressive-filled the room. Meisha sank to her knees, her back throbbing from wielding the dagger. She felt warm moisture that was not sweat soaking through her jerkin.

Stupid, Meisha thought. She'd reopened her wound. The bats would love her now. Talal was still on the floor, half-hidden by a cloud of dark bodies. Meisha felt the rush of air from leathery wings stir her hair and clothing. Bites stabbed her flesh, a few at first, but gradually increasing as the bats narrowed their attacks. By some luck, the choker faired no better.

The bats did not discriminate in their frenzied biting, and choker screams rang out, echoing Talal's frantic cries.

A bat hit Meisha from behind, pinning her on her stomach to get at the source of the blood. Frantically, she rolled, but her vision was all leather and claws. Meisha stabbed with the dagger, making a slit in the creature's wing. Slashing diagonally, she split the leather curtain in half and scrambled free.

She crawled to Talal and rolled the boy onto his stomach. Slapping the bats away, she lay flush against his back. Blood from a dozen bites soaked her as she wrapped her arms around him.

"Close your eyes and don't move," Meisha said against his ear. Without waiting for him to comply, she chanted a spell and prayed the pain wouldn't make her lose consciousness.

The flame column wavered and dropped, falling into itself like a water spike in a dying fountain. Plunging straight down, the fire emptied into Meisha's spine.

The Harper came up with a howl, her back arching. Flames burst from her wound, her eyes, and her mouth, smothering the bats in a blanket of charnel heat. She hoped her body was enough to protect Talal from the upward blast of flame. The oily scent of burning meat filled the air as bats rained around her.

Meisha came down on her back, gulping air that tasted foul but felt sweet on her lungs. Dizziness caused the caverns ceiling to waver and bend, but at least there were no more bats.

She looked around for the choker and found it huddling out of range of the fire cloud, dangling from the stalactite where Braedrin's body had been. Lambent eyes watched them in the flickering light from the burning corpses.

It was weighing how much of a fight they had left to offet, Meisha thought.

Angrily, she flung out an arm, focusing on her tingling fingertips, gathering power until… there, just enough. A tongue of flame sparked from her finger, illuminating her nail with a purple glow. She followed that glow with her eyes as she traced a circle above her head and around Talal's shoulder, past their feet and back up, encasing them in a ring of power only Meisha could see.

"Trotbliese!"she cried, and fire sprang up where her finger had traced. The ward would last, even if she lost consciousness, but if the choker got brave and crossed the flames or dropped down on top of them, they'd be dead. Meisha hoped the fire and the deep dagger wound would be enough to convince the creature not to risk it.

She lay back, letting the flames from the circle wash over her. Her eyes slid closed. She had no strength left.

She awoke sometime later as if from a fever dream. Sweat poured off her skin, yet she shivered with cold. The ward fire still burned.

"Are you spent?" asked Talal. He was sitting up, his knees drawn under his chin. He looked like a small, tetrified boy.

Meisha angled her head to look at him. She smiled crookedly. "Hardly," she replied.

She looked beyond the watd, but the choket was gone. Braedrin's body lay outside the circle, nipped and chewed by the deep bats. His eyelids wete gone, making the whites appear huge in his ravaged face.

"I think I can walk. We should get out of here." Meisha pulled her gaze away from the chilling sight, just in time to see the dwarves walk through the cavern wall.

They came through in silent procession, armed, ringing the fire ward with their own protective circle. There were ten in total, but Meisha's shocked gaze fastened on the leader-a dwarf in dented plate armor, holding a broken battle-axe.

CHAPTER 20

The Howling Delve 4 Marpenoth, the

Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

Iremember you," Meisha whispered, when the dwarf came to stand in front of her.

He shifted the weapon from fist to fist, and Meisha saw, in the hollow of a hairy throat, a translucent chain, as thin as a cat's whisker. A pendant hung from the chain, with a carved scene depicting the figure of a mountain with a hole in its center

Meisha had seen a similar pendant around the neck of a gold dwarf scholar, long ago. And before that, around the neck of the ghost that haunted her arrival at the Delve. It was the symbol of Dumathoin.

"Keeper of sectets," she greeted the ghost.

"Bearer of the Harp," he replied. He stood so close, his breath should have stirred the air, yet Meisha felt nothing.

The spectral circle fell back to flank their leader. The dwarves' faces held no expression. Meisha wondered whether they saw her at all. When the leader spoke again, his eyes glowed with faint, silver light. Meisha felt the words scrape against her bones.

"Take the warning."

Wetting dry lips, Meisha rose to her knees, which put her roughly at eye level with the ghost. She felt Talal scuttle behind her, pressing against her back. The dwarf paid him no attention.

"What warning?" Meisha asked. "Who are you?"

The dwarf didn't move or make a sound, yet suddenly Meisha clutched her head. Screams reverberated in her mind. She looked back at Talal to see if he had heard them too, but the boy kept his eyes on the ground.

Meisha waited for the ache between her temples to pass before looking back at the dwarf. "Was that you? What happened here?"

"Secrets at rest beneath the earth stay buried, or come to light, according to Dumathoin's will," the dwarf intoned. "We violated that law and brought the beast upon this plane. Dumathoin charges us to put it right. Take the warning to other secret keepers," he repeated, and swung his axe point level with Meisha's chest. Flames from her ward came up through the blade, casting an orange glow on the spectral metal. He stretched out his other hand in a fist. "Do not ventute here."

"What did you-ahh!" Meisha's hand flew to her chest. Coldness spread across her skin. She yanked back the fold of her jerkin where her Harper pin lay. The metal radiated a deep chill; het skin beneath the cloth was red with it. Meisha lifted the pin away from the tender flesh, but the dwarf had lowered his arm, and the cold began to fade.

"Take the warning," he repeated.

Angrily, Meisha shouted, "What warning? We can't take any warning anywhere! We're trapped here, just like you. Unless you can show us the way out, your message won't go ten paces without hitting a wall and splintering into silence."

The dwarf took a step forward. Talal whimpered, clutching at her clothes. "Stop. He'll kill us. He killed Braedrin."

"No, he didn't," said Meisha, shaking the boy off. "The choker killed Braedrin." She looked back at the dwarf. "Something else killed him, something else broke his axe. Is that what you want to keep hidden- the fire beast?"

"And the magic that violates the stone," said the dwarf.

Meisha felt Talal stir behind her, but he kept silent. "Varan's tinkerings?" she asked.

"Magic builds upon magic, layer by layer, century upon century, until it is too bright and terrible to comprehend. We collected the power here, and the power brought the beast. It was not our intention, and now we must pay for our crime. We must keep him bound."

"That's where Varan is getting his components," Meisha realized. "The secret caverns are yours. All those years ago, he found one of your bolt-holes. He created an extra-dimensional pocket to get to them, and now he's plundering the magic you left behind to make his toys."

"The gathering power will wake the beast. He seeks release; the walls are breaking down. Soon he will be free."

"We can't subdue Varan without risking him bringing down the whole cavern system," Meisha said. "We need help." Take the warning. She grasped her Harper pin as an idea began to form. "Your power affected this," she said. "Can you affect the same object, at a greater distance? Can you push your power through the earth?"

"I can," the dwarf said. "There will be a price."

Meisha didn't like the sound of that, but she didn't see any other way. "The closest person..." Gods, she thought, when I tell him it's Balram, he'll come running. He won't know what to make of this. "It will have to travel over many miles," she told the dwarf.

"What are you doing?" Talal wanted to know.

"Sending a message," said Meisha.

"What is it?" Kali asked.

Kali and Dantane stood over the wizard's worktable while Dantane sifted through the charred remnants of the magic that had killed the lute player, Dynon Chadossa.

"Whatever the outcome, the magic's intended effect was to create an illusion, something to make the boy appear and sound as a woman to conceal his identity," Dantane said.

"I spoke with his family privately this morning," said Kail. "Lord Chadossa, as far as I could tell, appeared genuinely baffled. He was unaware his son even enjoyed music, let alone possessed a talent for bardcraft."

"It would appear Dynon didn't want his father to know about his shameful hobby," Dantane observed as he dug out one of the charred roots for closer inspection.

"There's no profit in bardcraft in Amn, not if you're the son of a wealthy lumber merchant," said Kali. "The boy must have realized his family would be subject to ridicule if word got out that he spent his nights plucking a lute instead of helping his father challenge the Bladesmiles for their stake in the lumber trade. He'd've done better building instruments instead of playing them."

"The punishment will be much wotse now that he's been killed employing a magical device-a faulty one at that." Dantane tossed the root aside and went for another.

"There will be no retribution from the families," Kail said. "Chadossa has seen to that."

Dantane taised an eyebrow. "Oh? Amn has suddenly developed a forgiving nature when lives are threatened by horrific wizardry?"

"The family officially reported Dynon missing as of this morning. A search is underway, but the outlook is unfavorable. The Lady Chadossa is sick with grief, or so I'm told," Kali said, his voice flat. "The body of

the lute playet is being reported as an unidentified human female, as many witnesses can attest."

"You know it's Chadossa's son. Chadossa knows."

"Yes, but in the lord's words, 'sullying his family's name with magic won't avenge the boy's death.' An investigation into where he acquired such dangerous magic might, but Chadossa seemed uninterested in that suggestion," Kali said bittetly.

"What did he offer you in exchange for your silence on the matter?" asked Dantane.

Kali looked away. "A substantial loan-enough to cover my remaining debts-with next to no interest attached. He was most… generous."

Dantane looked impressed. "Then your worries are over. You can reestablish your father's business in a season. Many blemishes on your name will be forgotten in the wake of such a feat."

Kail shot the wizard a withering glance. "I will keep my silence, but I didn't take the deal, as you knew I wouldn't."

"How would I know?" countered the wizard, appearing genuinely surprised. "Any merchant family in Amn would welcome Chadossa's offer, and if I'm not mistaken, your goal is to count yourself among their elite. I know nothing of your motives or character, nor do I care to learn. If you wish to impress someone with your nobility, seek out your lady. Oh, but I forget," Dantane said, sneering, "She only pretends to be yours, as part of your ruse. Go to

the friends who watch over you, then, if you can root them out from their hiding places."

Kali bristled. "You speak outside your experience, Dantane. Tread lightly where my friends are concerned."

"Of course, Lord Morel." Dantane offered a mocking half-bow. "Perhaps, if you feel the need to prove something, you should avenge the boy's death yourself. You obviously want to, since Chadossa will not. My only interest in the matter is how long you can continue to pay my salary, and since you refused Chadossa's offer, the answer to that is clear. Fortunately for you, this"-he rustled the ashes of the lute player's bane-"interests me gteatly. Its age alone makes it worth a fortune Dynon Chadossa could not have hoped to have lying about."

"How old?" asked Kali, setting aside his anger for the moment.

Dantane held up the tendril he'd been examining. "I was wrong. These aren't roots. They're threads. The ones which remained intact after the burning are made of some type of ore.

The item is not plant-based, and no wondei. I'm only estimating, but some of the components appear to be over a thousand years old." His voice rose excitedly. "But there's more. There are layers here, magic from multiple casters who may or may not have lived in the same centuiy. It's as if I'm unraveling a tapestry put together by different weavers. I'm going to attempt to identify the layers. If I can do that, I might be able to determine where

the magic malfunctioned, turning the boy from a woman to a monster." He gestured for Kali to move aside. "You'll want to observe from a safe distance. If whatever affected Chadossa's son tries to attack me as well..."

Kail's sword hissed from its scabbard. "You'll have a quick death," he said.

"I was going to say I'll need your aid to break free," Dantane said sourly, "but I've just now reconsidered. Stand back."

Reluctantly, Kali moved to the far side of the room and stood near the window. He rested his sword point down in front of him and leaned against the wall, waiting.

Dantane knelt on the floor, placing the remnants of the item in a prepared circle of symbols drawn in chalk lines on the floor. His fingers moved, stiffly at first, gradually gaining speed and dexterity. Steepling his thumbs, the wizard pressed the backs of his fingers tightly together in a tough imitation of one of the symbols on the floor. The corresponding mark burst into a blue radiance. The wizard continued to gesture, and each of the symbols in tutn lit to join a sttange, pulsating dance around the charred item.

Kail raised a hand against the sting of the blinding light. If Dantane succeeded, he wondered, then what? Chadossa's own family didn't cate what had caused Dynon's demise. Why did he? Was it simply because he'd had a taste of Dynon's life- because

he'd known the father who gave nothing of himself, except his name, to his son?

He'd never known Dhairr, not ttuly, Kail admitted. As a boy, he'd craved the man's attention, but eventually he'd accepted the fact that Dhairr was content only when building his jewel empire and plotting against invisible assassins. Kail knew nothing about the man's past or how he'd met Kail's mother, Alytia.

He had to believe there was more to what he felt than a sense of neglect. His and Chadossa's stories were common enough among the merchant families. There were certainly worse fates than being born to an uncaring father.

Kali thought of Aazen, and wondered if his friend truly had managed to escape his father, or if he was still trapped in Balram's unyielding grip.

Wingbeats sounded behind Kali, and the scrape of talons on stone as a hawk landed in the open window. A moment later, Cesira stood beside him. Her familiar presence bolstered him.

What is he doing? Cesira asked, nodding at Dantane.

"Either divining the secrets of an ancient magic or preparing to blow the tower apart," Kail answered, as the light brightened to a blinding intensity.

Cesira's eyes narrowed. What is the second magic originating from?

"The second-what?" Kali swung toward her sharply.

Cesira pointed, but Kali saw it-the second blue glow reflected in her eyes. Twin rectangles of light outlined Dantane's cupboard on the far side of the tower.

"Dantane!" Kail shouted. He started forward, but Cesira grabbed his arm.

Do not, she said. You could injure him.

The point quickly became moot as the light from the circle soared upward in one explosive beam, trailing shattered symbols and throwing Dantane flat on his back. The wizard stared vacantly at the tower's ceiling as the wild magic ripped it apart. Support beams and planks flew into the empty sky. At the same time, the glow from the cupboard burst from its confines, blowing the cupboard doors off their hinges.

In a darkness lit only by columns of ancient, glowing stone, the fire beast stirred, awakened by the brutal release of power. It came from within the Delve and without at the same time, strong enough to awaken him from his forced sleep.

The beast sensed he had slumbered a long time, dreaming strange dreams of dark chambers filled with whispering mortals. They lived and scurried about like rats above his head, rats ripe for hunting.

In the beast's dream, his fire and claws were gone. He was a one-eyed wizard surrounded by bright power. He'd used the human form, and wielded magic he'd never known before to strike at someone-a woman. Where had she come from? She was a threat. She'd come too close to his secret. The beast

had tried to eliminate her, but he interfered-the wizard.

Now that the beast was awake, he started to remember. Rage burned tracks of fire in the stone beneath his feet. He remembered the one-eyed wizard who had maimed him. Was it his power that had awakened him? Had the fool undone his own spell? No-it was the dwarves. The magic clearly had their mark upon it.

The realization brought the beast fully awake. He stood, muscles flexing, and filled the narrow chamber to its ceiling. The ancient columns reacted slowly-too slowly-and the creature remembered that the columns were not columns at all. The dwarves were still here, silent watchers hoping to keep him contained by the will of their pathetic god.

Not anymore, the beast thought. He let out a satisfied howl that shook the stone foundations. He dived at the nearest dwarf and bit it in half, his massive jaws tearing its spectral limbs.

He remembered the taste of dwarf flesh, the sound of dwarf screams as he ate each one alive. He found the sound as pleasing now as he remembered. The wailing of the pitiful soul was lost, and the beast turned to face its comrades.

He was free, and soon he would have living prey to hunt. He had the tools; all he needed was the opportunity.

Kail tackled Cesita, pressing her beneath him as wood and stone rained down around them. He

gritted his teeth as splinters embedded themselves in the flesh beneath his collarbone.

He looked out of the bare hole where the ceiling had been. Debris struck the earth at least ten feet out from the tower in a destructive ting, slicing through the Morel colors flying on the opposite tower.

Kali looked across at Dantane but couldn't tell if the wizard still breathed. Kali started to rise but fell back again as the light from the cupboatd shot across the room, seeking release in what was left of the confined space. It struck the tower wall but did no discernible damage. Kail gave silent thanks. If the light had punctured the wall, the resulting explosion would have caved in their skulls and buried them in stone. Instead, the beam thickened and began to take shape-a humanoid shape, to Kail's eyes. He could make out little else in the dust-choked room.

Cesira raised a hand and clasped his shoulder. Dantane, she said, and Kail nodded, keeping his eyes on the shape.

Kneeling beside the wizatd, the druid probed his wounds with careful fingers. At het touch, Dantane blinked his eyes open, focusing on her blearily. He seemed beyond speech.

Kali positioned himself in front of the pair as a dwarf figure stepped out of the dust and into the sunlight that now poured through the roofless towet. He was half Kail's height but easily his equal in gir th and stride-length. The dwarf carried a broken battle-axe and a visage completely devoid of expression.

His body passed through furniture and debris as easily as if he walked through dust. His boots made no sound, and left no footprints on the stone.

"Greetings, Kail."

Kali stattled so badly at the sound of the voice he neatly dropped his blade. The ghost's lips fotmed the greeting, but the voice that came from the dwarf's throat was not the deep grating of the mountain folk, not at all like Garavin's steady rumble.

The voice was female. The voice was Meisha's.

Kail turned, daring to take his eyes off the spirit to look at the cupboard. Cesira followed his gaze, and her eyes widened.

The magical light had incinerated his mother's pouch. It had also consumed any mundane items the pouch might have contained. All that remained was Alytia's silver Harper badge, standing up on end. The light emanating from it shone straight out to the dwarFs form like a banner in a high breeze.

Kali looked back at the specter. "Meisha?" he asked. He couldn't believe it. "What is this?"

There was a long pause, but just as Kali started to ask another question, the dwarf spoke again. "I don't have long, and I can't answer the questions crowding your tongue, so listen well to what I can tell you.

"I need your aid, Kail," the ghost continued with Meisha's voice. "I'm trapped in the Howling Delve with a group of Esmeltaran refugees. They escaped

the siege, the same one that drove your father out of the city those years ago.

"The Delve is a stronghold long inhabited by my master, Varan Ivshar. Its location is underground roughly twenty miles southwest of Keczulla, but that information will do you little good. The entrance to the Delve has been hidden and sealed magically, by agents of the Shadow Thieves."

Cesira caught her breath in surprise, and Kali muttered a curse.

"The only way in or out now is a portal used by the Shadow Thieves, a portal that leads to somewhere within Amn. I'm asking you to find the door in, if you can, and come to get me. The Shadow Thieves are after magical items. There's a warehouse worth stored in the Delve, and they're putting considerable manpower behind removing and selling them on the black market."

The message paused. "There's something else down here, a beast of fire. I haven't seen it, except in nightmares, but my friend the ghost says it's worse than the Shadow Thieves. I think… I think it might have done something to Vatan, as well-changed him. I can't be sute.

"The only thing I can tell you about the portal is that the dwarves probably used it when they were still alive. Vaian's markings aren't on it. The dwarves used the Delve as a stronghold, so they must have had the portal connect to a major city, a place to sell what treasure they collected. Keczulla is closest, but it could just as easily be Athkatla or Murann, gods

forbid." There was another short pause. "If you receive this message, come soon, Kail. I need eyes, and blades, and whatever else you've got. It's not just the Shadow Thieves, old friend. When the Shadow Thieves come, Balram and his son come with them."

The dwarf fell silent. Kali took an unsteady breath. Indeed a thousand questions swirled in his thoughts, but he forced his lungs to work instead. He addressed the messenger. "Can you speak?"

The ghost seemed to focus on him for the first time, but he said nothing.

"Who are you?" Kail asked.

The ghost lowered his battle-axe. Kail got a good look at his hands and realized the dwarf had lost parts of multiple fingers. They flexed against the wooden handle.

"I have given my warning," the dwarf said simply. "By Dumathoin's command."

"Wait!" Kali cried, but the ghost had already gone. With him went the brilliant light, and as the clouds of swirling dust began to settle, the full extent of the damage to the tower was revealed.

The ceiling was obliterated. Boards and blocks of broken stone litteted the floot. Most of Dantane's equipment was destroyed.

Cesira had her hands over a deep wound in the wizatd's throat. She mutmuted a prayer, and soft, yellow light spooled from her fingers. The physical

manifestation of the spell coveted Dantane's bloody gash, closing and mending the tender flesh.

"Is he going to live?" asked Kail, when she'd finished.

A dry wheeze answered him as Dantane spat a clump of dirt and blood on the stones. He coughed again, and Kail realized the wizard was laughing. The humor looked ghastly on his bloodstained lips.

"This house… is a tragedy-a treasure. You are cursed, Morel." Dantane hacked more blood, shuddered, and began to breathe normally. "I've explored Netherese ruins and never encountered such a clash of the Art. Mystra in her humor leads me to power in the most magic-barren country in Faeriin. I shall never doubt the Lady again."

Cesira helped Dantane to a sitting position. It appears you've given him an epiphany, my lord, she said.

"Wonderful," said Kali. "I'm delighted someone's enjoying this."

Do you think it's genuine? Cesira asked.

"The message? Yes. And if Balram's involved…"

"So you'll be going after her?"

These last words were from Dantane. Kail looked at the wizard, at his torn robes, and the shambles of the room. "Why should that concern you?" he asked. "I would have thought you'd be lamenting the loss of your workshop and demanding restitution from me."

"Oh, I'll get to that," Dantane assured him. "But if you're going into the Delve, I'm coming with you." Before Kali could protest, he said, "Consider that the beginning of yout restitution."

"Why?" Kali wanted to know. "Is it just for the power you smell, Dantane? Pity you didn't learn a lesson just now, when it nearly killed you."

"You're hardly in a position to judge me, Morel. Kindly refrain." Dantane wiped the blood from his mouth, but his gaze never left Kail's. "The magic tempts me greatly. I don't deny what I am, the power I want. But there's something else-and this will interest you both." He sifted through the rubble until he uncovered his ruined magic circle. "The incoming message disrupted my spell, so I could not identify young Chadossa's magic item, but it hardly matters anymore. The Art is identical. The spells came from the same source. They collided and became wild magic. If you find your sorcer-ous friend, you'll find the cause of Chadossa's death."

"The Shadow Thieves," said Kail. "Balram." And Aazen.

Kail remembered his friend's words as Aazen watched the lute player sing his last song. Can you believe I may have found other companions? Kali never dreamed Aazen would number the Shadow Thieves among his friends.

"Now we know the reason the Chadossas didn't pursue a murder investigation," said Dantane. "The family has been dealing in dangerous magics through the Shadow Thieves. Chadossa can't have

that information known to the general public. For myself, I want to find the source of the power I felt, and I would be more than willing to help you take it from the Shadow Thieves."

Kail wondered in whose hands the magic would do the most damage. "Do you have contacts in the city? Wizards?"

When Dantane hesitated, Kali snapped, "Speak. You want powet-come to the Delve and take all you want. If yout speech about ancient magic is true, that should be mote than fair compensation for risking your friends' identities. I'm no threat to them, especially not after this explosion, which was likely witnessed by half of the Gold Ward. The merchant families will have taken my head long before they get around to yout friends."

Dantane didn't disagree. "You'll let me choose my tewatd- fot myself and my contact, should he agree to aid us?"

"If Meisha allows, so do I, just set up the meeting. Find someone who knows about this portal."

Dantane nodded and left them. Kali waited for the echo of his footsteps to fade before rounding on Cesira. "You're staying silent in this?"

No, said the druid, surprised. What's angering you, Kail? Surely not the loss of a tower or Dantane's greed?

Kail shook his head. "I sent her," he said, "to her master. I sent her right into Balram's hands."

Meisha is more than capable of seeing to herself and this is larger than Balram, said Cesira. You heard Dantane. There are forces at work neither you nor Meisha could have predicted.

"It was the same with Haig, my father, and Aazen," said Kali, as if he had not heard her. "I couldn't save them. Now Meisha may die. And Aazen…"

You believe he's involved? Cesira asked.

"Yes, and I'm afraid I'll be forced to put a blade through my best friend to accomplish what I must." Kali had ptayed, nightly, that it would not come to that. He prayed Aazen had escaped, or if he hadn't, that he would let Kail save him from his father's shadow. Merciful gods, shouldn't Kail be allowed to save at least one of those closest to him?

An image of Meisha flashed before his mind, drawing his deliberations to a close. "Dantane will find the portal," he said.

Yes. Cesira nodded.

"Setting up the meeting will take time."

Time enough to send a message of your own? Cesira asked, crooking an eyebrow.

Kail nodded. She knew what he was thinking. She nearly always did. "I want to know more about this Howling Delve." And if they were going underground, who better to aid them than a digger?

He cupped the sword's emerald between his palms and called out in his mind. His voice traveled across

miles and mountains, to reverberate with the sword's sister stone. The gem graced a new weapon, a weapon that was not of Morel house, and yet the owner was no less than family to Kail.

CHAPTER 21

The Earthvault 5 Marpenoth, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

Garavin Fallstone strode back and forth on a patch of empty ait before a large expanse of cavern wall. He held up a taper that had burned down to threaten his thumb and had coated his arm in a waxy cast. He noticed neither circumstance, and continued to read the historical record etched deep into the stone.

The runes were inscribed with the same care and precision taken by a Candlekeep scribe, and Garavin should know. He'd been such a one, though it seemed like a lifetime ago: a scribe, a digget-Deepwatden for his clan. Garavin had worn many mantles, but all of them felt at home in the Earthvault.

The cone-shaped cavetn rested far beneath the Marching Mountains. Mages of Shanatar, the ancient kingdom of the shield dwarves, had created it centuries ago. The vault was, to Garavin's mind, the most impressive archive to be found outside Candlekeep's doors. From the lowest point, where only worms burrowed, to the highest i idge, the history of the shield dwarves and their great realm unfolded for any of dwarf blood-and only those-to tead.

Far below Garavin's boots, a tawny mastiff with stiff joints slept on the cavern floor, next to an account of the beginning of the shield dwarves' shattering war with the duergar. Garavin's satchel and maul rested

against Boris haunches, but the mastiff didn't notice when the emerald in the weapon's handle began to glow. Only when the stone hummed with gathering power did the dog stir and leap to its feet, and that was more the fault of the huge elemental being that appeared out of the air.

The powerful earth dao, keeper of Earthvault lore, spoke in the Dwarvish tongue.

"What magic do you bring, Garavin Fallstone, once son of Sorn? You disturb the stones."

"My apologies, Diuthaizos," Garavin said, bowing respectfully as he floated to the floor. "The Art will do no harm. I will take it above, so as not to offend."

Nodding regally, the dao floated away, but kept one wary eye on the dwarf and his companion.

Garavin sighed and picked up the glowing green maul. "Well, this trip is looking to be shorter than expected." He touched the emerald with a crooked finger. "Wonder what the boy wants now, eh?" But he smiled as he said it.

The meager apartment had thick walls. That was the only quality Aazen could recommend about the place. Situated above the vacant storefront of Eromar's Tailoring, the pair of rooms had frigid floors in the winter and rats scuffling in the walls in the summer. Aazen's music drowned them out, yet did not carry to the street. He had a cot in the corner with a blanket and a sheet, a chest of drawers, and a washbasin. He had few personal effects to store, save his violin, so the tiny space suited him well.

At peace, lost in his music, Aazen fumbled the bow in a discordant screech when the Cowled Wizard came up the stairs.

Jubait Ardoll looked far too nervous to be a proper wizard, but perhaps it was the secretive nature of his organization that bred the look of rabbit-wariness in his eyes. He wore a large black pearl earring in his left ear and was bald but for two unattractive strips of shorn hair arching over both ears. Most folk assumed he was a former Nelanther pirate. Dressed as a pirate, obviously he must be so. Amnians were not much on imagination unless it earned them coin. They had as little notion of his real occupation as his fellow wizards. Dressed as a wizard, obviously he must be so and nothing more-certainly not an agent of the Shadow Thieves.

Aazen watched impassively as Jubair raised a hand in greeting, then immediately stumbled back with a cry of pain, nearly falling down the steep stairs. A line of blood appeared at each of the wizard's ankles, dribbling down to stain his gold-threaded slippers.

"Watch the wire," Aazen suggested.

Jubair stepped over the invisible trap, hurling a stream of curses any pirate would have envied. "You might have warned me, you sick bastard."

"I wanted to finish my song," Aazen said, removing the violin from his chin.

Jubair glared at him. "Is your father insane, lad, or merely cow-eyed stupid?" he said without preamble. "The Cowls haven't stopped murmuring about the

incident at Morel's party. It's all I can do to steer their eyes away from the streets."

"I wonder why you bother," Aazen said, sliding the violin back in its velvet-lined case. "As my father predicted, Chadossa is not pursuing the matter. No evidence points to us. It was simply an unfortunate mishap. These things happen when dealing with arcane magic," he said, "as any Amnian will rush to assure you."

"And you know as well as I the horse dung that drips from merchants' mouths," Jubair said, his face reddening. Magic intolerance was one of the few things that could stir the man to anger. "The thing's face melted, Kortrun, is what they're saying. They had to scrape it off Morel's floor."

"I take it, then, the Cowls will not let the matter rest?" Aazen asked, "despite your best efforts?"

Jubair rubbed his pearl between two fingers, looking ruffled. "There have been inquiries. I've managed to convince most of them to let me look into the matter, but I have to give them something, a scapegoat preferably. You have to tell your fathet- get him to see reason. If he continues to act recklessly, the whole operation could be exposed. That will be you and me," he said, flapping his hands in the air between them. "Daen won't go down for this, but he'll see that your father does."

And soon aftet, his corpse will be cooling on my floor, Aazen thought, but he didn't speak the sentiment aloud. "I'll talk to him. We'll have something for you soon."

Jubair nodded, appeased. His gaze fell on Aazen's instrument. "I didn't know you played," he said, eyeing Aazen curiously.

"Mind the other wire on your way out," Aazen replied, putting the case away in the bottom drawer of the bureau.

Jubair looked stricken. "The other wire?"

"I set it at neck level. Most people who enter my rooms uninvited end up with an extra air hole in their throats," Aazen told him. "Fortunately, you're smaller than most. Don't find me here again, Jubair," he said over the wizard's outraged sputtering. "This is my private space, away from my father, away from the Cowled Wizards, and away from the Shadow Thieves."

Still fuming, Jubair maneuvered his body carefully across the threshold in a half-crouch. "Do you truly believe any place is private from Daen?" he scoffed, his eyes alight with taunting amusement. "The Shadow Thieves are your family now, except they're larger, more dangerous, and more vindictive than most. If you didn't want that, you shouldn't have signed on alongside your fathet."

I had no choice, Aazen thought. He remembered the Hatper down in the Delve, the woman he'd allowed to bleed to death because the Shadow Thieves-his father-demanded it.

He thought of Kail. He knew his friend had survived the battle with the broken magic item. He hadn't been worried about Kail's safety, but he regretted the incident had to happen in Morel's house. It would

have been better if he had not allowed Kali to see him. His friend surely suspected his involvement in the murder. More than that, if Kail decided to pursue the matter, he could pick up the trail far easier than the Gem Guard or the Cowls. If he suspected the trail might lead to Balram, Kail would follow it to the Abyss and back. No, the Cowled Wizards didn't concern Aazen. Kali was the threat to fear.

Aazen wondered if he should mention to his father just whose roof Varan's broken toy had ended up under. Doubtless he would find the irony upsetting. No. Balram would find out soon enough. Then he would tell Aazen what to do about it. Aazen had no doubt that if it became necessary, his father would make him deal with Kali and his allies personally.

I have no choice, he repeated, speaking to Kail in his mind. He reached again for his music.

The Silver Market was held, appropriately enough, in the Silver Ward in the Jade District; it was also called Selune's Market, for it took place at night during the warmer months. The market was the Jade District's answer to the Jewelers' Quarter, where the largest concentration of jewelry in Keczulla was made. But Selune's Market was fast gaining a reputation as the place for up-and-coming merchants. Whether it was jewelry, loose gems, or elaborate, jewel-bedecked clothing one wished for, the Silver Market was the place to spot new talent and possible future competition.

Dantane rounded a corner, weaving between two comely lasses in low-cut gowns who offered him trays of sugared peaches.

Cooking vendors had set up stalls along the ends of the avenues, so that you couldn't cross one street onto another without being intoxicated by the scents of fresh fruit and spices.

Dantane crossed a back alley and froze as a group of gray shadows detached themselves from the buildings. Wraiths, he thought in disgust. He had no time for this.

Keczulla knew its share of poverty. The wealthiet merchant families contributed generously to providing homes for orphaned children, as a way of showing off their vast fortunes, but some youths could not be tamed by civilization. These half-feral children, the Wraiths, roamed the night markets in packs, stealing food and purses hugely by surrounding easy marks and overwhelming them with sheer numbers, plucking, biting, and scratching until the unfortunate soul gave up and surrendered any belongings of worth.

Theit bodies were emaciated, smeared in mud to protect them from the sun. They shaved their heads with crude knives to keep away lice. Sometimes their appearance alone was enough to have folk fumbling at their purse strings.

Dantane was not imptessed. He turned to the encroaching maggots and hissed a spell. His hand glowed brightly, spitting sparks that hissed as they stmck the mud-coveted bodies. The Wtaiths halted their charge and scatteted to the far sides of the alley. No mattet how hungry or desperate they were, none of them wanted to battle a wizatd.

Eddricles waited for him beside one of the beet wagons, scowling fiercely when a plump-faced man tried to offer him a sample. He stood examining a belt strung with multiple gold chains. He wrinkled his nose critically.

"Paint is never going to conceal the fact you've only gold enough to make half a belt. I suggest you reduce the number of chains-twelve is hopelessly gaudy-or sell belts to starv-ing ladies." He tossed the belt back at its red-faced owner and rounded on Dantane. "I detest charity work," he said, by way of a greeting. "Speaking of which, you, my boy, are fortunate I'm in a good humor. Walk with me, but not too close. I don't want anyone to think I like you."

Dantane reluctantly fell into step beside the moneychanget. It was said Eddricles could determine the value of a gem without the aid of a glass. Dantane suspected the man's extraordinary vision was due more to the fact that he was also a wizard, but he'd never asked Eddricles to confirm or deny the theory. In the moneychanger-wizard's presence, one tended to listen, plead, or weep. Dantane listened.

"The next time you send me a missive, please don't bother to include the words: magic, portal, sorcerers, or Morel-gods, especially Morel. Do you know what they're saying about the whelp?" He didn't bother to let Dantane answer. "They say he employs a wizard, a wizard who murdered a bard at the man's own party and blew the top of one of his towers off." He whirled abruptly, forcing Dantane to sidestep. "Do you happen to know what fool wizard

is begging from Morel's table these days? What a bountiful feast it must be!"

"No one knows who I am," Dantane said calmly, speaking for the first time.

"They'd bloody well better not!" Eddricles stormed. The normally aloof moneychanger was as agitated as Dantane- and perhaps the whole of Faerun-had ever seen him. "You and Morel have been rutting all over the lives of respectable wizards in this city. We haven't been able to meet in safety since Morel returned."

Eddricles and several other Keczullan wizards met often in secret to share magic and discuss their craft without threat of molestation. Dantane knew they feared their own activities coming to light in the wake of Morel's string of tragedies.

"I did not murder the bard," Dantane said as they resumed their walk. "And you should know the woman was not a bard, nor a woman at all, but a powerful merchant's son, one who dabbled too deeply in magic he did not understand."

"Hells, Dantane, you've just described every young family in Amn. They're all delving into business they shouldn't be."

Dantane scowled. "I was not aware the merchants or the Council of Six made any exceptions where their hatred of magic was concerned."

"Oh, they don't, and neither did those young hotheads like the one you scraped off Morel's floor. Not at first. When the corpses were still cooling from

the plagues, the families who'd lost all were ready to grab any wizard and tear him to pieces. Likely some of them did too. Publicly, the grudge against the arcane still stands. But much as Amn would like to live in a comfortable, xenophobic nest, wider Faerun encroaches. The Sythillisian Empire is a reality, and the truce will never last. Amn needs power and allies, and these allies will scoff at the notion of a society fighting wars without using killing magic-as well they should.

"But more than that is the inevitable cycle of time. These young merchants and theit children ate fascinated by the things their parents have forbidden them. It will be many more years before the plagues are forgotten, but I wager you're seeing the start of it right now, with these magic items."

"Do you know where they're coming from?" Dantane asked as they passed in the shadow of a dressmaker's tent. "The magic items? Are the Shadow Thieves running the opetation?"

Eddricles considered the question. "If the items are as powerful as you claim, the Shadow Thieves had better have a hand in their distribution. They may be extortionists and cutthroats, but at least they have the resources to handle such magic."

"Not this time, if the debacle at Morel's party is any indica- ' tion," said Dantane. "What about the portal?"

Eddricles laughed loudly. The sound was disconcerting, as if he lacked sufficient ptactice in the action. "Do you think me an idiot, boy?"

Dantane wisely kept his silence.

"Do you believe I will give you information on one of the best-kept secrets of one of our most powerful merchant families without the guarantee you'll make it well worth my while?"

Eddticles pulled Dantane to one side of the avenue, whete the crowd was sparse. He hustled the wizatd close by the collar of his robes and spoke rapidly into his eat.

Dantane listened and nodded. "It can be done. I've had assurances from Morel."

The moneychanger rolled his eyes, clearly not happy, but he nodded agreement. He spoke again, softly, so Dantane had to strain to hear him. He managed to catch the most important word, and his eyes widened.

"Bladesmile."

CHAPTER 22

The Howling Delve 5 Marpenoth, the

Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

Meisha came awake to total darkness and hands pressing her upper arms. She struck out, found a human throat, and dug her fingers into it. She heard a ragged cough and the smell of garbage hit her square in the nose. She relaxed her grip and heard Talal hiss, "Sune suck me, but you're a mean one."

"Why is it dark?" she asked. "I left a candle burning."

"I blew it out. We have to move, Lady," he said urgently, – pulling her up from her pallet. "Don't," he hissed as she began chanting a spell. "No light. No damn fire. Give me your hand."

He took her down the passage out of the warrens toward Varan's chamber. Meisha could see a faint line of light beneath the wizard's door. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"Shh! They're coming," Talal whispered.

"The Shadow Thieves?"

"Them-Balram too. And his son. One big, happy clan again."

Meisha stilled. "Both of them? Why?" "To make sure you're dead. We have to hide you. If they find out we kept you alive…"

"Wait." Meisha caught his arm, stopping him in front of

Varan's chamber. "You said they never go in here. They're afraid ofVaran."

Talal shook his head so vigorously Meisha felt it through his entire body. "He'll attack you again. They'll find your corpse, and it'll still be bad for us. Come on!"

"I won't touch anything. I won't disturb him." Voices drifted out to them from the watrens.

"They're gathering everyone together," Talal said, fear rising in his voice.

"Then we're out of time." Meisha hauled the doot open. Ambient light from the room cast shadow pits on Talal's pale face. "I'll be fine," she promised. She reached out to ruffle his hair playfully, because she knew it would annoy him.

The boy darted away, snorting. "Oh, sute, rip my throat out then pet me like your lap dog. Don't fret, Lady, my manhood's unscathed. If you'te going to do this, give me your boots before you go in."

"My what-why?"

"Just hurry!"

Rolling her eyes, Meisha pulled the buckles loose and braced herself against the door as Talal yanked off her thigh-length boots. Het stockinged feet instantly went frigid when they touched the Hoot.

"You'te welcome," she muttered as the boy darted off down the passage in the direction of the voices.

Meisha pulled the door shut, sealing it securely from the inside. She stood a moment with het ear to the wood, listening fot approaching footsteps, but she heatd nothing. Taking a deep bteath, she turned to face the room and whatever doom might await her.

Varan was asleep. She'd looked in on the wizard from behind the door a handful of times since coming to the Delve, and each time he'd been awake and active, building his mysterious items. She'd never seen him at rest.

He lay in a half-slump in a corner, clutching sheafs of parchment in limp fingets, far away from the pallet Haroun had made for him. Meisha suspected he worked himself into exhaustion and simply collapsed whetevet he happened to be sitting.

His pile of magic items had been depleted. Talal or one of the others had collected the ttibute.

Moving along the wall, Meisha sat down a safe distance from the wizard. His breathing was deep and regular, but his arms and legs twitched erratically, like a dog in the throes of some distutbing dream.

"What are you seeing, Master?" she whispered aloud, knowing he could not heat het. "What is totmenting you?" Was it the fire beast? Meisha had always sensed a wtong-ness, a feeling of malevolence lurking at the edges of Varan's underground sanctuaty, but remembering the

ghost's warning and her own strange dreams, she felt the sensation intensify a hundtedfold.

And now the Shadow Thieves were here. Meisha ran a hand down her back, over the ridge of healing flesh. She hadn't been strong enough to take them on when she was whole. She had no chance now. All she could do was pray to the Lady that Kali had gotten het message. The ghost had said only that he would deliver it. He hadn't appeared since to confirm or deny its receipt.

Sighing, Meisha traced a circle in the dirt and sediment in front of her. "Chareff" The familiar power kindled-the first spell she'd ever learned.

Always have a candle for the tats, Shaera had chided her.

She placed the tiny flame in the circle. Meisha lay down on her side, curling around the fire so she could watch Varan sleep.

He continued to toss and turn fitfully. Meisha bit her lip as she felt powet stir anew, magic awakened by the wizard's violent trembles. It called to the sorcerous power within het, raking over her skin like hot coals. She shuddered.

Then why not end it? Give him a quick, merciful death.

The memory came out of nowhere, the words biting at

Meisha's heart. The woman who'd spoken those words to Kail was unrecognizable to her now. She

had no desire to be reminded of the person she'd once been.

"Kail," she whispered, feeling tears sting her eyes as she remembered the young man who'd stood defiantly in her path and watched his death smolder in her eyes. "I understand now."

She could never kill Varan. Even had she the magical might, she had no will for the task. Not when there was a chance he might be saved.

She closed her eyes against the memories, retreating instinctively into a meditative trance. Varan had taught her that, as well. She would need to conserve as much strength as possible for what lay ahead. She'd been wrong-she couldn't rely on Kali getting her message. Something had to be done to get the refugees out of the Delve before Varan became any more volatile. For if the fire beast didn't kill them all, Meisha knew, deep in her soul, Varan would.

Haroun walked beside Talal to the front of the warrens, where the refugees stood herded together. The crowd stood tense and wary, fighting desperately to keep the guilt off their faces as Balram questioned each about Meisha.

"I don't remember you." Balram held the back of his hand to his nose as he spoke to Talal, but the boy only grinned innocuously.

"I was smaller when you were here last, sir," he said. His voice was chipper and polite, as if he were trying to sell Balram goods on a street corner. "Cleaner too, I'll warrant."

Balram didn't answer but looked back to where Aazen leaned against a wall. "You're sure she was a Harper?"

Aazen shrugged. "She wore the pin. I left her body beneath the portal. Only the bloodstain remains."

"I see." Balram grasped a fistful of Talal s dirty hair. He didn't pull or shake the boy; he simply held the tender strands straight out behind his left ear, sifting them through his fingers. Talal stiffened, and the vacant smile on his lips slid away, replaced by a taut line as fear battled with anger.

Aazen waited. He'd been on the receiving end of this punishment when he was younger than Talal. He knew what would happen if the boy displeased his father.

"What did you do with the Harper's body?" Balram asked. "These people-your friends-say you're a scavenger. Did you scavenge her corpse? You don't look like a vulture, though you're filthy enough to be one." He leaned closer, still holding Talal's hair. He sniffed, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "Your breath stinks of refuse. You'd eat your own droppings, wouldn't you, if you thought they'd nourish you. Did you eat the Harper too?" His eyes gleamed wickedly. "Are you so very hungry? But that's ungrateful. Don't we feed you well enough down here-provide for your every need? Only an animal eats its own leavings."

"I didn't eat her," Talal said. His voice trembled with suppressed rage. "I took her boots." He pointed to his feet.

A pair of brown leather boots bunched up awkwardly around his knees, straps and buckles dangling. Scorch marks from old fires bruised the leather.

"They're hers," Aazen said. "I remember sitting on them."

"Oh-ho." Balram chuckled. "Straddled her like a two-taran whore, did you?" He clucked his tongue. "Isslun will be disappointed in you. Or is it Aliyea?"

Talal stirred. Balram snapped his hand straight out from the boy's head without looking away from Aazen's face.

Talal screamed out in pain and fell to his knees. He clutched at the patch of bare, bloodied skin behind his ear. Tears streamed from his eyes.

Haroun started forward, but Aazen caught the woman's arm, roughly drawing her back. "You will only worsen the pain," he hissed in her ear.

She glanced up at him, surprised, but kept her silence.

Balram calmly sprinkled bits of loose hair over Talal's whimpering form. "It certainly sheds like an animal. What a mess you are." He crouched down, snagging Talal's chin. "If you're truly the heartless vulture, why should you care what insult I give the Harper?"

"I don't cate," Talal said through gritted teeth.

"Oh, but it seemed like you did, just then. The look on your face was terribly affronted. I'm warning you, boy, if you value these people's lives, you will give me truth. Where is the Haiper?"

"We brought her here!" Talal shouted. Jerking away from Balram, he climbed back to his feet and stood defiantly before the gathered Shadow Thieves. Behind him, the refugees, though far greater in numbei, stood in stunned, terrified silence while Balram regarded the boy.

"Why?" he asked.

"We tried to heal het," Talal said, calmer now. He wiped his running nose as blood dripped down his neck. "So she could help us escape."

A collective tremor went through the crowd, but still no one spoke.

"Did you expect we wouldn't try?" Talal asked mockingly, his eyes daring Balram to come at him again.

Balram smiled. "I wouldn't have expected an animal to speak so boldly. Yes, I knew you'd tty. Were your efforts rewarded?"

Talal shook his head. "She died during the first night. We didn't want to waste our last healing draught on a lost cause."

"Really?" Balram sounded impressed. "What little mercenaries you've become… that is, if you're not little liars. Where is the body?" He raised his hand again, tracing the air alongside Talal's head.

The boy refused to flinch. "Follow me," he said. "I'll take you to her."

She awoke to a hand softly brushing her cheek. Meisha opened her eyes and saw Varan staring down at her.

Her hands were numb from being pressed against the cold floor. She clenched them into painful fists to keep from throwing herself away from Varan, but he merely sat before her, one hand endlessly shuffling his papers, the other resting on her skin, as if he had forgotten he'd laid it thete.

Slowly, Meisha uncurled her body and slid out from under his hand. She came to an unsteady sitting position against the wall, still too close to the unstable wizard for comfort.

How long had she been meditating? No, that wasn't tiue, she thought, berating herself savagely. Meditation had turned to sleep, and a deep one. That had nevet happened to her before, not unless she willed it. Had Varan used some magic to make her sleep? The thought was more than unsettling. Meisha knew what he could do to het when she was awake and aware. It was frightening to contemplate what he might have done to her while she was helpless in sleep.

Helpless in sleep.

Meisha stood up so quickly that Varan looked up from his reading. His smile struck her with a profound chill. "You're dreaming, m'dear. Back to sleep now, child. Thete's a good girl." He resumed his shuffling.

Meisha slid back to the floor quietly, but her thoughts raced. Even in his current state, even asleep, Vatan had sensed her presence in the chamber. He may have been confused about who she was or how old, but he knew someone was there with him. Of course-it should have dawned on het long before now.

Varan had known all along when the refugees were in his chamber. They shouldn't have been able to take his discarded magics from him without his consent, not while he could still cast spells-and she'd had painful proof that he could capably defend himself. But accoiding to Talal, he'd nevet attacked any of them, until Shirva Tarlarin and Meisha herself, after she'd picked up the banded sphere. Meisha looked around the room for the item, but it was gone, taken in the last delivety to the Shadow Thieves. Varan didn't seem bothered by its absence.

Why, then, had he attacked her? Perhaps there had been another reason behind his violent outburst. Perhaps he'd killed Shirva Tarlarin for that same reason.

She watched Varan for a long time, but his face registered nothing and offered her no clues.

Meisha jumped at the sharp rap on the door.

"It's just Talal," Varan muttered without looking up from his papers.

Meisha's mouth slid open and shut, but she had no time to marvel at Varan's flashes of lucidity as the door opened a crack and Talal wiggled through.

"What happened to you?" Meisha demanded, seeing the dried blood on the boy's neck and shirt.

"Lost some hair," was all Talal would say. His hands shook slightly as he ran them through his dirty locks. His eyes were bright, hard chips of stone, but he smiled as he reached for her hand. "Still alive, I see. Good. Come with me. You'll like this."

Curious, Meisha followed him out into the corridor and down the passage he'd tried to take her through before. It arched away from the warrens and back up a tunnel in a tough horseshoe, emptying into a circular chamber bounded by steep flowstone sides. Scattered about the floor were piles of small- to mid-sized stones.

Meisha stepped around Talal to see at a better angle and realized the piles were arranged in tidy rows. A group of men with shovels scooped rocks onto a high mound at the back of the chamber.

"They're graves," Meisha said, counting the fallen and coming up with the exact number-plus one-of refugees Talal said had died in the Delve. Her gaze returned to the fresh stone pile.

Talal followed her eyes. "Like it? One of em's yours. We dug it the night I brought you in," he explained, and had the good grace to look sheepish. "You know-just in case. After you mended, we kept it for when they came back. Oh"-he kicked off her boots and held them out-"you can have these back. Don't fit me anyway."

"They believed I was dead?" Meisha asked, suspicious. "On sight of a grave alone?"

Talal exchanged grinning gazes with the circle of digging men. One of the men winked at Meisha. "Not at first," the man replied. "But Talal told em we'd dig you up, 'yes sir, right away sir-it'll only take a few days with these little stick shovels you give us, sir.' " The digger laughed heartily. ¦

"So we started in," Talal said, frowning as he fingered the newly naked skin behind his ear. "We actually dug up Shirva. Aazen left with half the men and the latest shipment when we started digging, and Balram didn't linger to look beyond that she was female and recently dead. It's just like before," he said, looking at Meisha. "Balram hates the Delve, everything about it makes him twitchy. It was all he could do to be down here smelling us."

"Bloody cowards," another man said. He spat on the ground.

Meisha smiled at Talal. "You have my thanks," she said. "You've saved my life twice now."

The boy jerked his shoulders, but he was blushing fiercely. "Nothing to it, Lady. You get us out of here, Tymora puts us in balance." He added quickly, "The bitch."

"We have to talk about that," Meisha said, looking at the gathered men. "Get everyone together, if you will. We can't wait for Kali to find the portal. We have to try to escape on our own, and the only way out is through the Shadow Thieves." There was restless murmuring among the men, but Meisha ignored them. "According to Talal's brother, at least one of them has the key to activate the portal. We're

going to take it from the next party that comes through the door."

Eyebrows soared around the circle of diggers, but Talal grinned, slapping an arm around Meisha's neck. "What'd I tell you, boys? She's going death-seeking again. That's our Meisha."

When the diggets had dispersed back to the warrens, Meisha pulled Talal aside. "I need to know about Shitva Tarlarin," she said.

Talal looked surprised. "What about het?"

"Do you know which of Varan's items she touched that set him off? Was anything found near her body?"

Talal thought for a moment. His eyes clouded. "She had one of his strings," he said finally. "From his neck sack."

"His neck pouch?" Meisha asked. She hadn't expected that. Then she temembered the rings. She'd put the apprentices' rings back in Vatan's pouch at the same time she'd been handling the sphere, just before Varan attacked her. Had Shirva Tarlarin touched the pouch too? "Is that why he killed her?" she wondered aloud.

"Don't know, but the string was wrapped around what was left of het fingers. I think he"-the boy swallowed-"near as we could tell, he bit some of her fingers off taking it back."

A mental picture of Varan attacking a woman with only his teeth made Meisha light-headed. She felt Talal steady her with a hand to het waist. "Why

would he do it?" she asked. "He keeps nothing of great magic in there. What is he hiding?"

CHAPTER 23

Keczulla, Amn 5 Marpenoth, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

Cesira stood in the ruined tower, watching through one of the arched windows as Dantane, Morgan, and Laerin rode toward the estate.

Kail came to stand behind the druid. He lifted a hand as if to touch het long hair, but her tresses stirred in the wind, blowing out of his grasp.

You never asked me, Cesira said, turning to face him. You didn't ask me to stay behind.

"I was afraid you'd say I was a damn fool," Kail said with a laugh. "I thought I'd try an indirect approach to get you to do my bidding."

As if you've ever had a problem convincing me of anything. And you've always been a damn fool. Getting some years on you doesn't change anything, she said. Why do you want me to stay here? Even my charms-though considerable, I grant you-won't be enough to save Morel's name. Amn has seen through all our pretenses.

"It isn't for that," said Kail, frowning. "Don't you think I would rather have you at my back down that snake hole than Dantane? Now which of us is the fool?"

Then why?

"Because Balram won't stop us from entering the portal. He'll find out about it, and he may put up a token resistance, but he wants us to get in. And once we're inside, he'll come in after us and bring all manner of Hells down on our heads. He'll want to kill us all underground, where no one will see, then go about his business."

Cesira laughed shortly. You fill me with such confidence, my lord. I may faint from it, she said.

Kail shook his head. "I'm not worried about a fight with Balram in the Delve. But if he tries to seal us in, if Garavin's plan to get the refugees out fails, we need someone on this side who can blow that sealed entrance apart. You're the only one I trust, and the last person I ever wanted to ask to do this." He took her hand, folding her fingers around a small emerald.

Cesira looked at him questioningly. He showed her his sword. It rode at his hip as always, but the emerald in the pommel had gone. When Garavin took his gem down into the Delve, she could use her magic on the link between them to locate the hidden entrance, bypassing any concealing magic laid on the tunnel.

"Take rooms at an inn somewhere in the better districts," said Kail. "Garavin will use his stone to call you, if something happens." He grinned lopsidedly. "Believe me, if something goes wrong, we will call. I'm not too proud to ask for a rescue if I can't dig myself out of a hole."

But Cesira frowned, refusing to be distracted by the jest. Take rooms at an inn? Why would you ever think I would agree to hide, Kali? What are you protecting me from?

Kail hesitated. "This house won't be safe. When Balram finds out who's coming after him, he may send men here."

And?

"And if he does, they'll be out to destroy whatever is left of Morel. No loose ends this time. Balram won't allow it."

Then I hope he won't be too disappointed to find the lady of the house here to greet him.

Kail's eyes narrowed. His lips moved, but no sound came out. What was that, my lord? Cesira asked teasingly. Iam the one who lacks speech, remember?

Kail put his hands on her shoulders and squeezed, fighting the temptation to throttle her. "I said, you're a stubborn, arrogant wench."

And you're a blind pig's arse, Cesira threw back, if you think I'm running away to hide.

"I can't have him get to you." Kail tried to steady his voice. "I won't let it happen."

Kali… Her anger gone, she seemed as much at a loss as he.

If anything happened to her, Kail realized, it would be the end of everything. He'd begun to build a new

life the night he'd been hurtled through the pottal to Garavin's camp. Now the ashes of his old life threatened to destroy everything he'd come to cherish.

Kail stepped back, kneeling before Cesira. He lifted a hand toward her. "Come here. I want to show you something."

Hesitantly, Cesira placed her hand in his palm. His fingers wrapped securely around hers. He guided her to the floor, splaying her hand beneath his against the tough wood. "Do you feel that-that catch?" he asked.

Cesita nodded and pressed. The false floor slid back to reveal a slender nook, no wider than theit two arms but just as long. Arrows filled the pocket. Dust covered their fletching, but the points were still shaip enough to kill.

"My father feared attackers from every direction, even before Balram's magic took his mind," said Kali. He felt calmer now, and oddly detached as he spoke of the past. "He had dozens of these caches hidden throughout the estate. I don't think I've managed to find them all, but there are weapons and traps- some of them wickedly ingenious. I've written the locations down, along with instructions for how to set the traps. Morgan and Laerin were very helpful in that area, as I'm sure you can imagine. You'll want to go through everything step by step so you can remember where they are without looking fot them."

Cesira watched his face as he spoke. You knew I would insist on staying, she said. "Yes."

The druid forced a smile. Perhaps, she said, after all this is over, you'll return to Mir with me? Unless, after you pull off your heroic rescue, Meisha decides to make you a Harper.

Kail groaned, a little of his old humor returning. "Gods forbid. Being a merchant was difficult enough."

"Ye don't need to be harping, anyway," echoed Garavin's voice from the stairwell. He appeared at the door, grinning. Morgan, Laerin, and Dantane trailed behind in the stairwell. "I've seen ye dig, and that's fine enough work for any man."

"I didn't think I'd ever be able to stand upright again, after that first day," Kail said with a mock wince.

"Ah, well, that was all part of my plan. Bent over, ye could hear me better. Young people are too tall for their own good- makes it harder for them to listen."

Did you find what you needed? Cesira asked the dwarf.

"Aye, but it came at a high price." He wagged a finger at Kail. "This little adventure had better hold my interest, young one," he warned.

"Trust me," said Kail, clapping the dwarf on the shoulder. "If Meisha's message is any indication, it's long past time the Delve's secrets were brought to light. Dumathoin will approve."

"And Abbathor's fury will be unleashed," said Garavin.

"What do you mean?" asked Dantane.

"Meisha's Howling Delve is named for a dozen or so dwarf venturers who fell to the sway of the god Abbathor," said Garavin. "The Howlings worshipped Dumathoin first, but greed corrupted them. They were banished from their clan and went into exile."

"Into the Delve," said Kali, "and into business with Amn. According to Dantane's information, the ancestors of the current Bladesmiles made a substantial and secret fortune buying magic weapons and item components from the Howlings. They made the exchanges through a portal that connected the Bladesmile estate with the Delve."

"Until the day the portal went dark on dwarf heels and never lit again," said Dantane. "The Howlings disappeared and so did the supply of magic. Subsequent Bladesmile generations locked away the portal and removed its keys. If they couldn't make money off it, they didn't want their name associated with arcane magic. Except now the portal's been reactivated."

"By the Shadow Thieves," Kail said, "in a quiet, no-questions-asked arrangement with the Bladesmiles." He looked at Garavin. "We hoped you could tell us what this 'beast' is."

"I couldn't say, but Abbathor and Dumathoin have long been enemies. One is forever trying to draw faithful away from the other. Abbathor won a plump victory with The Howlings, yet this ghost ye spoke of wore Dumathoin's symbol-with the gem sundered from the mountain. I'm suspecting the two gods are

still at war over the Howlings. It could be on account of the beast the sorcerous lass hinted at-a prize for Abbathor, surely, and a secret Dumathoin wants bound to the earth. When we go down there, we'll be caught in the middle of the fight."

"Standing between two dwarf gods is not the most appealing place to be," Kail conceded.

"While we're speaking of that," Garavin said, "have ye given any thought to what ye'll do when ye encounter yer friend?"

"I don't know." Kail had avoided thinking about what he would do if Aazen came down into the Delve after him.

If he's made his choice, Cesira put in, You won't dissuade him, not after he's spent so long under Balram's hand. He won't be the friend you remember.

Come with me! Kali remembered shouting, in vain. He had escaped and was given a new life with comrades to walk beside him and to protect him when needed it, because they counted him as a friend. Aazen had had nothing but pain.

Kali couldn't forget that ultimately, without Aazen's help, he never would have had the chance at the life he enjoyed now. Balram would have killed him before it all began, if not for Aazen. Kail would never know how much that small bettayal cost his childhood friend, but he'd seen the scars on the boy as early as seven years old. He knew Balram's fury was immeasurable.

"He gave me a chance," Kail decided. "I'll give him the same."

Gatavin nodded, and something that might have been approval lit his eyes.

Is the magic Rays gave you sound? asked Cesita, changing the subject.

"According to Dantane, it is," replied Kali. He held up a large bloodstone, deeply green in color with red flecks. Rays's item, bought at a high price, would transport them to a similar gem located in the portal room at the Bladesmile estate. All they had to do was take care of whatever guards weren't drawn away by Rays's distraction and get the portal key.

"Once we're in, the Shadow Thieves'll be nipping at our heels." Garavin turned his maul over in his hands. "We'll have to be hoping we're not strolling into a maze to find yet friend."

"Then it's fortunate we have the Sword Coast's foremost expert on caves and tunnels in our party," said Kail, grinning.

"Ah, the flattety of the very young and foolhardy knows no bounds," Garavin sighed. "Here I thought ye brought me along for me battle prowess."

"We'll be needing lots of that too." Kali placed the bloodstone on the floor in the center of the tower. "Dantane, you and I are first," Kail reminded the wizard. "Light spell ready, in case we're headed into the dark?"

"Yes," the wizard replied. Kail hesitated. "Slaying spell ready, in case we're headed into ceitain doom?" he asked hopefully.

Dantane made a gesture that had Laerin clucking his tongue. "Get on with it," the wizatd snapped. Kali put his hand on the gem, leaving room for Dantane to do the same. "The rest of you, wait for a moment, then follow." He looked at each of them in turn, his gaze resting last and lingering on

Cesira. "Remember what I told you," he said, all trace of humor gone. "Please."

She nodded, not speaking.

The gem pulsed, veiling the tower in a ted haze. Cesira blinked, and Kali was gone.

A moment passed in silence. Laetin tossed a gold danter into the air. A circle of six tiny stars winked on its foreface as it fell. Morgan snatched it out of the air, juggling it with nimble fingers.

"Told you," he said smugly.

Laerin sighed. "No tearful parting, no farewell kiss," he said, putting his hand on the bloodstone. "Cesira, my love, I'm going to have a talk with both of you when we tetutn."

Cesira blew him a kiss as he and Motgan disappeared.

Garavin knelt next to the gem, gripping the mastiff by its thick collar.

Watch over him, Cesira said.

"Like as not, he'll be the one watching me, but I take yer meaning. Ye take yet own care, lass," Garavin said. "The last thing he wants is for ye to be hutt by his enemy's hand. He wouldn't recover from that blow."

Cesira shook her head. Balram is my enemy too. I don't know if killing him will resolve anything for Kail.

"But ye're willing to find out?"

Eager, said the druid.

CHAPTER 24

The Howling Delve 5 Marpenoth, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

Maybe you killed them all," said Talal hopefully. Meisha stood in the center of the cavern where they'd found Braedrin's body. Her eyes were on the ceiling. Her arms dangled loosely at her sides.

Talal held her shirt and boots. She wore only her leather jerkin, bound tightly at the waist by her belt, and her breeches. Her lips curved as Talal fidgeted. "You're welcome to wait with the others," she offered.

"Cowards, all of'em," Talal said, pitching his voice to carry down the passage where Haroun and the others stood ready.

"One step at a time," Meisha said, closing her eyes. "They're taking their fates in hand. They're already terrified to be defying the Shadow Thieves."

"Terror?" Talal sniffed. "Terror will be when my clothes fall apart or get burned up standing too close to fire-crazed sorcerers. I'll be tromping around

here naked before I beg that bastard Balram for more clothes."

"Gods forbid," came Haroun's voice from the passage. "Just you keep that in mind while you're clinging to the walls out there!" Talal bellowed.

"Settle down," said Meisha. "I can hear them. Get ready."

"Nets up," Talal called down the tunnel. "Even if you do get them to fly down the right hole," he said, "how do we know they won't just chew through the topes and get loose, maybe in the warrens?"

"I treated the ropes with poison," said Meisha. "It isn't lethal-not even painful-but it'll taste awful to the bats. Besides, we only need to funnel them to the cavetn off the portal room. As long as that net holds, we'll be fine. Get down!" she shouted as black shapes began to pour from the hole near the ceiling.

Talal hit the ground as deep bats filled the chamber. He watched Meisha step back, cross her arms over her chest, and burst into a pillar of flame.

Kali passed through the portal and started to fall. He reached out blindly, his hands sliding down rocks, but thete were no handholds. He fell into empty space.

Abruptly, his back and buttocks hit something solid. He flung his aims behind to catch himself, but they kept going, flailing in midair until something else caught his atmpits and held him securely.

Panting, Kail looked around. Dull green glows revealed an expanse of hemp net stretched taut across a circular chasm. His legs and arms dangled through gaps in the net. All was quiet but for the swaying and creaking noises made by his weight against the rope. Beyond the chasm lay a large expanse of cavern, with tunnels adjoining either end. The tunnel in front of him was clear, but an identical, crudely fashioned net draped the one behind him.

Kail looked up and saw a mifrot of what lay below him; but the shaft in the ceiling was clear of obstruction, lit by green radiances from the active portal. He watched, transfixed by the unusual perspective, as one by one his companions plummeted through the light and down the shaft.

Kali braced himself as they hit the net. Each impact jarred his back and shoulders. The net strained under their weight. Garavin's hound howled as it tried to disentangle its legs from theit painful positions.

"We need to get off this," Kail said, noting the frayed ends of the rope looped around three nearby stalagmites. "The rope won't hold all of us."

"Meisha didn't mention a death trap'd be waiting for us," Morgan said.

"This was probably her work." Kail helped Garavin lift Borl out of the tangled ropes. "Without it, we'd be at the bottom of the chasm."

"Still could've warned us," Morgan grumbled.

Kail waited until they were all off the net. Using his sword, he hacked the ropes free from the stalagmites. The net sailed down into the darkness.

"The Shadow Thieves will have ways to avoid the chasm," Dantane pointed out.

"Now they'll have to use them," Kail said. He turned to Garavin. "What about it, old friend? Are we in the right place?"

The dwarf examined the cavern walls, clasping his holy symbol reflexively. "Aye, lad," he said. His voice sounded unnaturally thick. "We're here." He turned to look at Kali earnestly. "Dumathoin is here too."

Kail and Laerin exchanged glances. "What do you mean?" asked the half-elf.

"Where do ye feel most at peace, Laerin-closest to yet god?" asked the dwarf.

"In Erevan's grove or Dugmaren's tunnels," answered Laerin.

"This is Dumathoin's place," said Garavin. "But it's been tainted."

"He's right," said Dantane. The wizard closed his eyes. He appeared to be listening, though Kali detected nothing breaking the stillness but the distant sound of water. "There's some sort of distant aura in effect."

"Meisha's master lived in the Delve," said Kail. "Could it be some latent magic of his?"

"I don't think so," said Dantane, "not unless her master was of another plane."

"Meisha was trained as an elementalist," said Gatavin. "Might be there's links to the elemental planes here."

"Kail," Morgan said abruptly, "we're not alone."

Kail turned. A child stood in the opening of the clear tunnel, watching them with wide, fearful eyes. Her face was pale and thin, almost emaciated. Kali took a step toward her, but she darted off down the tunnel.

"The refugees," said Laerin. "Do we follow?"

Kali nodded. "Light two torches. Keep your weapons out but down. We have to find Meisha."

"Kali." Dantane pointed to the other tunnel branching off the chamber. The net sttung over its mouth glistened in the torchlight. A thick, mucuslike substance dripped from the ropes, collecting in black puddles on the floor. "Something's coming."

Kail heard it-the sound of ait rushing up the too-narrow tunnel. Next to him, Borl growled from the gut, shifting agitatedly. "Get away from the net," he snapped as Dantane bent to examine the black drippings.

The wizard ducked away as a leathety wing swiped at him. Twin lines of needle-teeth bit down directly in front of his face. The bat screamed as the black substance filled its mouth and foamed. It fluttered back against a wall of a dozen or more creatures just

like it. Their wings tangled in the small space, causing them to snap indiscriminately at each othet.

"The Shadow Thieves?" Laerin said. "Or are these meant for us?"

"I don't know," Kail said. "But we're not going that way. We follow the girl." He looked at Dantane. "You have the pottal key?"

Dantane touched a pouch hidden in his robes. Within, he'd placed the oblong stone that activated the portal from this side of the Delve. Rays had kept his word.

"It will be safe," Dantane said.

Kali nodded. He and Laerin led the way down the open tunnel. Dantane, Morgan, and Garavin brought up the rear. Once out of the spell light of the portal room, the tunnel became stygian. The torches cast a glow in front and behind their group but made the ait close and smoky. Kail couldn't imagine being trapped in the enclosed space for any length of time, as the refugees had been. It would have driven him mad.

The passage turned, weaving in a snakelike pattern for several yards without changing direction. Laerin pointed to the ground, where scuffed imprints of bare feet were clearly visible, even in the wavering torch light. "She won't be hard to track."

Frowning, Kali held up a hand for the group to pause. He listened. "Why don't we hear her running?"

"Maybe she's hiding," Laerin suggested. "We won't hurt you, little one," he called out down the tunnel.

Far off, Kail thought he heard a whimper. "Let's go."

The tunnel angled gradually, and at an intersection, Laerin guided them to the right. The tunnel dipped, forcing them to crouch and move single file.

"She's smart," said Morgan. "She knows we'll catch up to her on open ground. She's looking for a mouse hole."

The passage turned again, and finally Kali could stand upright. He shone the torch ahead and stopped, holding back Laerin and the others when he saw the girl.

She stood at the cusp of a second intersection, as if unsure which path to take. She swiveled her head to look back. Her eyes widened when she saw Kail, and she started to dart away.

"Don't!" Laerin shouted, springing forward.

The girl flinched. Kali saw her foot slide forward and heard the pressure plate click. The half-elf s sharper vision had seen the trap even in the shadows.

Laerin snagged the girl by the waist and pulled her to the ground beneath him. Above their heads, a spear burst from a hole in the tunnel wall, shooting across the intersection to ricochet off stone.

"Are you all right?" Kail asked. He statted to move forward,; but Laerin held out a staying hand. I

"Let Motgan check the intersection first," he said.

Kail gave Motgan the totch, waiting while the rogue checked the walls and floor for more spear holes. Laerin kept i a protective arm around the girl, but Kail saw him wiggle his eyebrows and whispet something to het that made her laugh. After that, het face lost much of its fear. The scene reminded Kali of how easily the half-elf had drawn him out, when he'd been a frightened boy in Mir. ‹

He turned to Dantane. "We can't take time to check all the walls. We need a barrier."

The wizard considered the tunnel wall where the spear had originated. He touched the stone and began a clipped chant.

A chill breeze funneled down the passage, tugging at Kail's hair. Dantane's breath fogged and the veins on the backs of his hands turned a sickly yellow-blue. The red flesh beneath his fingernails bled white. All of a sudden, he stopped speaking and slapped the wall with his open palm.

The sound was that of an ice-covered branch cracking against stone. Kali half-expected the wizaid's hand to shatter, but it did not. A sheet of ice spider-webbed from his fingers, the frozen strands shooting down the tunnel and thickening, filling. in the gaps until the entire wall shone white.

"That should hold anything that comes from the wall," Dantane said.

"Floor's clear," Morgan added, helping Laerin to his feet.

"Can you take us to Meisha?" Kali asked, crouching in front of the girl. Her eyes shifted to the torch in his hand, and Kali chuckled. "That's her-fire."

The girl nodded, and Kail set off again, keeping her just behind his hip as they walked along the passage. The tunnel stayed straight, and at the end of it, Kali didn't have to ask if they wete close. He could see by the moisture dripping from Dantane's ice wall.

They entered a deep chamber with a high ceiling. A pillar of brilliant flame stood in the center of the room, lighting;it to every corner. Meisha stood within the fire column, her hands clasped together against her chest.

"She's killing herself," breathed Dantane in fascination.

A hearty snort echoed in the chamber. "Not hardly."

Kali turned to see a boy of about eighteen or nineteen enter the chamber from an adjoining tunnel. He was as thin as the little girl, but his eyes held no fear, only defiance as he stared Kali down. "She just finished herding the last of 'era," he said. "Whore you?"

"Friends," said Meisha. The fire died away, leaving the Harper's skin sweat-slicked and flush. "Well met, Kail."

"Meisha." Kail held out his arm, and she clasped it gratefully.

"I see you brought the whole army," Meisha said, greeting Morgan, Garavin, and Laerin with a nod.

Her eyes fell on Dantane and widened with curiosity. "This one's new."

"Meisha Saira, meet Syrek Dantane." Kail waited while Dantane bowed politely to the Harper. "I wish I could say that was the extent of the party, but the Shadow Thieves will be coming behind us."

"That's what the bats are for," said Meisha. "We didn't know if you'd be able to find us. We planned an ambush."

"We'll need it." Kail looked at the boy. "Is this one trustworthy?"

"Likely more so than your wizard," the Harper answered, grinning when Dantane flushed in irritation.

For his part, Talal bristled with all the fervor of his nineteen years. "Trust me not to catch on fire, without so much as a warning," he muttered.

"Talal saved my life when I came down here," Meisha explained.

Kali nodded approvingly. "Then I owe him my thanks as well. Go get the others together, Talal," he said. "Not here- we'll gather them in the entrance tunnel. We need to know where the seal is."

Talal took off back the way he'd come. "What are you planning?" Meisha wanted to know, but Kali shook his head.

"You'll see. Garavin and Dantane have it worked out. Meisha," he said, pulling her aside, "where is

your mastet, Varan?"

Meisha's eyes were stone. "Varan is dead."

"Dead? But your message..."

"Oh, he still breathes," she said harshly, "and his mind functions, on some level. But there is no heatt in his eyes, no passion driving his actions, unless you consider madness a sustaining emotion."

"How did it happen?" Kail asked, shocked. "How did the Shadow Thieves overcome him?"

"It wasn't the Shadow Thieves. They exploited Varan's condition to get their magic items, but they didn't put him in his current state. I don't know how it happened, but now all he can do is sit in a room and make deadly magic."

Kail took it all in. "So Chadossa's illusion, the black matket in Amn..."

"The what?"

"A piece of broken magic that twisted a boy into a monster. It came from the black market." Kail's expression darkened.

"And they got it from Varan," Meisha said. "As far as I can tell, some of his creations woik, some are... broken, and run wild. But they're all dangerous, as long as the Shadow Thieves have them."

Talal's voice broke in as the boy came batreling back into the chamber. "They're on the move," he said breathlessly. "Every one of em." He noticed

Meisha's stricken face. "What? What's wrong?" He frowned at Kail, as if knowing instinctively he was to blame.

"I'm fine, Talal," Meisha said, forcing a smile as she looked at him. "Are you ready to bathe in the sunlight, Ditty Bones?"

He sniffed. "Ale is what I'm aching for. Keep your watet and sunshine."

"We'll use Meisha's bats as distractions," Kali said as they filed in to the tunnel. "Can you let them out safely?" he asked, looking at the Harper with concern.

"I'll take care of it," Meisha said.

She retraced Kail's steps quickly to the portal room, while the others headed for the main entrance.

Careful to avoid the bats, Meisha placed her hands against the poison-treated net and called the fire. The power, simmering dangerously close to the surface, answered immediately. There was no flame, but the ropes began to smoke where her palms touched them. She waited a moment to make sure the hemp would burn, then ran back to the opposite tunnel.

She slowed, wary, when she saw Dantane waiting for her.

"What was that spell?" he asked curiously.

"It will slow-burn the net away," she said. "Between the fire and the poison, the bats will have worked

themselves into a fine furor by the time our friends arrive."

"You're an elementalist," said Dantane, "and a sorceress. Have you learned to bypass spells completely, turning your raw power into whatever form you will?"

Meisha pulled on a loose end of rope left dangling by the tunnel mouth. A third net unrolled from the shelf of rock above the opening; poison slathered these ropes too. "No," she said. "The power would burn my organs from within if I tried."

"How can you be certain, if you've never experimented?"

"Because my master knew his craft. He trained all of his apprentices the same," she said, "before they were murdered- before my master was driven mad and sealed in a lightless prison to make toys for a man I would trade my soul to slay in the most terrible of ways."

She turned, and Dantane took a step back, disturbed- perhaps for the first time in his life-by the kindling power in the Harper's eyes. They shone red-raw, blistering wounds in a face ravaged by grief.

"Yes, Dantane. I am a fire elementalist," she said. "The best Varan Ivshar ever trained. And I intend to burn down the Shadow Thieves, even if it means suffering the fate I just described."

Behind her, bats flooded the portal room.

"How many are left?" asked Balram, when Aazen enteted the house.

"Four that I know of," said Aazen. "There may be more. My contact said that when Kail departed for the Delve, he left behind the lady of the house and a handful of servants. She should not be mistaken for a helpless chatelaine," he added. "She is a powerful servant of Silvanus."

But Balram didn't appear to be listening. "So Kail Morel has come full circle, back to the kingdom where he almost lost his life." He looked at Aazen. "Now you see what comes from leaving tasks unfinished," he said, as if Aazen were a boy sitting for a lesson. "The thorn has grown into a dagger, pressing at our throats."

"Fotgive me, Fathet," Aazen offered, but there was no passion in the words.

"The past is done," said Balram. "We will deal with what remains of Morel's house and then we will never have to think of him again. Take men down to the Delve," he instructed. "Kill them all." He gripped Aazen's arm when he would have walked away. "I mean all, Aazen. The Delve is due for a thorough scouring."

"What about Vatan?" Aazen asked. "Without his caretakers, he will eventually starve himself, or die of sickness, if his magic fails."

"After you've killed Kali, bring the wizard to the sutface," said Balram. "The portal is no longer secure. We will continue the operation above."

"You can't be serious," Aazen said. "Varan will not allow us to take him from the Delve. His magic is there. Whatever his diseased mind is planning, is there. He needs to stay in the Delve."

"Use the Harper," said Balram. "You said she knew him. Use her to get him to cooperate."

"He is mad," Aazen said deafly, trying to make his fathet see reason, "and the Harper is dead."

Balram's lip curled in a mocking sneer. "You don't believe that any more than I do. They must have switched bodies on us. Why else would Morel be seeking the portal, unless he had been somehow warned of our connection to the Delve? The Harper bitch is alive. The tunnel rats are hiding her, and now they'll pay the price for their betrayal. After you've secured the wizard, kill her and seal the portal. We have no more use for the Delve."

Aazen didn't know what to say. "Is this my death sentence, then?" he asked bluntly. "For betraying you as a boy and allowing Kail to come back to torment us? For that you're sending me into the Hells, hoping I won't return?"

Balram seemed genuinely taken aback, which gave Aazen a strange bit of comfort. "Never, my son," he replied. "I send you because you are the only one I can trust to see this done." He put both hands on Aazen's shoulders, as he'd so often done when Aazen was a child. The gesture had always come across as equal parts comfort and threat. "With the Shadow Thieves at our backs, we need never worry about

failure, about weakness, evet again. They are our family now."

Family, Aazen thought, remembering Jubair's words. What exactly did his father mean by likening the Shadow Thieves to blood? Oh yes, Balram had power now, such as he never had before, but they weren't free to act by any stretch of the imagination. Daen oversaw all Balram's actions, approving or denying his plans as he saw fit. Whom Daen answered to, Aazen did not know, and neither did Balram.

The Shadow Thieves wove a complex web around their organization, relying on anonymity to protect their power bases. At least, when Balram had served Morel, he knew where his superior's authority began and ended. How much control could they truly have over their own lives if they didn't even know the identities of their masters?

"Do you have such strong faith in your family?" Aazen said, aware even as he asked it that the question had multiple layers.

Balram cook his meaning. "I would trust them, and you, with my life," he said without hesitation.

Aazen nodded. "Then I'll see to the Delve," he said, "and to Kail."

Balram watched his son's retreating back. He said, pitching his voice low, "I've already arranged to send a second party."

Daen stepped into the room, taking a seat on one of the dusty sofas. His bulk had diminished somewhat over the years, but any rumors that the Shadow

Thief s heart was in any way failing him found themselves quickly and brutally squelched. "You believe he will betray you again, after all this time?"

"Once was enough," said Balram. "I'll not be blinded to him again."

"Ah, but you can't beat the lad into submission anymore," Daen pointed out. "And if he discovers you don't truly trust him, it may send him over the edge. This course of action may come back to bite you at the heel, my friend. How can you hope to stop him if he decides to go his own way?"

"By using any number of my other sons or daughters," Balram replied. "Those I've trained for a decade and more."

"The Shadow Thieves will support you," Daen agreed, "but that one is your blood. I wonder if you can forsake him so casually?"

"We'll see," said Balram.

In truth, Daen did not care whether the father or the son prevailed in this, yet he sensed in Aazen a fascinating strength: the ability to survive, even to thrive, under the most unique and terrible strain. The boy had lived in a hole in the ground and in the countless Hells of his father's making; yet he'd come out whole, or nearly so.

Daen had recruited runaways and child-cutpurses barely surviving on the streets, but most hadn't lived long and none ever knew who held their leads. Aazen had known that murderers and thieves protected him ever since he was a boy. He was a child of the

Shadow Thieves, if such a thing existed. Daen didn't know if that meant a long and prosperous career within their ranks awaited Aazen, or a quick death, but he decided it would be fascinating to find out. Through experience, Daen had learned to pay close attention to the people who fascinated him, whether they were intelligent, greedy, sane, or mad. The ability to read people, to judge their actions and worth, was what made Daen so successful at what he did. And the Kottrun family had made him a very rich man indeed.

Dantane trailed behind Meisha as they caught up to the others. Ahead, the passage widened into a chamber comparable in size to the portal room. The path dead-ended abruptly in a wall of loose dirt and rubble.

"This is where we came in. No need to fetch shovels," Talal said sardonically.

"Boy's right," said Morgan. "You won't be tunneling through that, not with magic on it."

"I'm not disagreeing," said Garavin. He scratched his thick sideburns as he eyed the wall. "Though he might relish the challenge."

"Who?" asked Talal.

The dwarf grinned at the boy. "Ye'll see." He handed Dantane a tightly wrapped scroll sealed in green wax and bearing the imprint of an open hand lying upon an anvil.

Kail tecognized the seal of the Fallstone clan. As a boy, he'd seen it depicted on several documents in

Garavin's map room.

Dantane unrolled the parchment and read for several breaths, nodding as if he'd seen similar text befote.

"Clear enough?" asked Gatavin.

"You'te certain you can control this?" asked the wizard. "There's no time to consttuct a summoning circle."

"It's not a summoning in the traditional sense," said the dwarf. "More like a calling. He may answer or not, as he prefers, but he's never denied me before."

Dantane's eyes moved rapidly over the text. Finally, he let his hands fall to his sides and closed his eyes. He murmured what might have been a prayer under his breath, opened his eyes, and| began to read aloud from the parchment.

This time his voice carried, booming unnaturally across the J chamber. A tremor of unease went through the refugees. Kali | motioned to Talal to keep them still. J

The echo of Dantane's casting seemed to stick in the walls, | building to a steady rumbling Kail could feel in the stone itself. 1 The air felt thick, as if he were breathing rock dust or sand J instead of air. The cavern seemed to grow smaller around them. | A single rock in the center of the cavern swelled in size before $ his eyes, expanding to fill the chamber, forcing the refugees t back against the far wall. A few of the people cried out or tried to run, but there was no room. A boy standing near the front of the

crowd stumbled and went down on his knees. A foot scuffed the side of his face as he tried to stand. He fell again, harder.

"Cease!" Kail barked over the rumbling, and his voice, too, seemed eerily magnified. The crowd quieted, and Kail helped the boy to his feet.

Kail turned again to look at the rock, expecting it to have returned to its normal size as the disorientation cleared. It hadn't. It had, if possible, gotten larger, and now appeared to be breathing. Slow inhalations and exhalations like the wind through a long chimney flue were punctuated by a deep moan coming from somewhere beneath the thing.

Kail had listened to Garavin tell stories of the delvers, beasts friendly to the dwarves. The slablike tunnel dwellers were as large and as cumbersome as boulders, and this one was no exception. Moving by inches and trailing a stain of sticky fluid, the delver made its way to where Garavin stood with one boot propped on the rock pile.

The dwarf put out a hand-in greeting, Kail thought; but Garavin laid his palm gently across the ridges and slopes that might have passed for the thing's face and bowed deeply, his holy symbol falling against his nose.

The low moan came again, and Garavin nodded as if in answer to a question with no words. "A poor way to wake, to be sure," he said, in tones of sincete tegret. "We would not have done so, if our need was not great, Iathantos. Dumathoin has asked, and so I

must ask ye to aid us, for ye're the only one who can."

The delvet fell silent. Kail looked around at the refugees, but they, too, were quiet, riveted in awe or horror at the exchange between the dwarf and the huge, living stone.

Finally, the delver shifted its great body, shuffled backward a step, and moaned again. Garavin inclined his head in response.

"My thanks." He pointed to the base of the rock pile, and the delver came forward again, engulfing the space with his bulk. There was a sharp cracking and a sloshing release of sizzling liquid. The stones turned dark with wet, and the delver began to burrow into the cavern floor.

Garavin walked back to the group, shaking his head, but he was smiling. He laid a hand on Talal's shoulder, guiding the boy to where he could see the churning as the delver took the stone into itself.

"He'll tunnel ye out, and do it gladly," the dwarf explained. "He absorbs minerals from the stone to nourish himself, and being that we're close to Keczulla, this rock is richer in them than most. That, and his loyalty to Dumathoin, made him answer out call."

"But it's not a dwatf," said Talal. "Not even a person. Why would it serve a dwarf god?"

"Because it thinks and understands like any other sentient a-eatute," said Garavin. "It may take him longei, and he may never aspire to the intelligence

of two-legged folk, but he's:apable of despair and loneliness, and of needing to combat:hose emotions."

"Then why doesn't it have its own god?" Talal pressed. 'Someone who understands him."

Garavin met Kail's eyes briefly, and Kail knew what he was hinking. Talal's questions were not unlike another cautiously itubborn boy's curiosity. "He might have," the dwarf allowed, 'I only know he serves Dumathoin for the same reason I do: to keep the secrets of the stone, and to bring the rest into the light, whethei it's gems and gold, fossils of history, or-"

"Us," Talal cut in, his expression thoughtful. "Down in the dark, where no one can see." He touched the patch of naked skin on his head. "Balram thought he could keep us a sectet."

"But Dumathoin would not have it so," Garavin said. "Sooner or later, all secrets come to light, whether we want them to or not."

"Will they be safe?" Kail asked Garavin, watching the delver work.

"Yes. Iathantos will protect them. He's given his word," said Garavin. "If any Shadow Thief gets past us, they won't cate for the fight they'll find waiting."

"What's he mean?" asked Talal, looking to Meisha for an explanation.

The Harper appeared torn. "We have to leave you now," she said, shaking het head when Talal opened

his mouth to argue. "The Shadow Thieves will have learned about Kail's rescue party by now. They'll be coming, and we have to meet them. An all-out assault will give the creature time to tunnel deep enough to cross the boundaries of the enchantment."

"Once you're outside, head for Keczulla," said Kail. "The delver will take care of any guards outside the enttance, but I doubt there will be any. They don't expect you to escape that way. Use my name at the city gates."

"Ignore it when their visages pale and they soil themselves," said Morgan.

Kail glared him into silence. He slipped a ring off his finger and handed it to Hatoun. The emerald and stone, in its gold setting, was the first symbol of his new status. Garavin had made it for him long ago using Cesira's enchanted speaking stone.

Haroun slid the ring onto her thumb. Her eyes swam with tears. "How can we thank you?"

"You saved my life," Meisha said. She looked at Talal, but the boy was shaking his head mutinously.

"I want to stay with you," he said, "for the fight."

"Ha," Meisha said. "You don't mean that, not when you're scenting freedom at last. No"-she shook him playfully by the shoulder when he tried to protest-"No more death-seeking for you, little Dirty Bones. We'll follow you out once we take care of the Shadow Thieves."

Morgan and Laerin filed back down the tunnel. Dantane and Garavin followed. Meisha took one last look at Talal and Haroun, who stood apart from the rest. Haroun had a firm hand on the boy's shoulder.

"They'll be safe," Kali said.

"I know." Meisha allowed the others to get some distance ahead of them, then she clasped Kail's wrist to slow him. "Balram's lived too long, Kail," she said fiercely, "taken too much. It's time to end him. You promised me."

"Meisha, I'm sorry about yout master-"

"Don't," Meisha cut him off. "When I saw him sitting in that room… you can't imagine how it felt." She caught her breath and looked at him sharply. "No, that's wrong. You can imagine. You've seen it before."

He nodded grimly. "Rage blocks all reason. You'll do anything to fix things. You'll forgive him any terrible thing he's ever done." Kali touched his sword hilt. "I'll keep my word, Meisha." He pointed to the tunnel. "Let's go get Varan."

CHAPTER 25

Keczulla, Amn 5 Marpenoth, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

Cesira heard the servant calling her from the foot of the stairs. Since the explosion, none of them had dared venture into Dantane's tower. While the druid appreciated having a place where her privacy was guaranteed, she'd come to the tower for a very different purpose.

The stones formerly connected to the tower's ceiling were chipped and broken, forming rough crenellations. The tower had become her battlement-Cesira perched on one cloven stone in hawk form, gripping the ruined surface with her sharp talons.

The servant had come to tell her about the party approaching the house, but Cesira's keen eyes had already spotted them on the road.

Cesira spread her wings and let out a cry, just to hear her voice echo into the twilight. She glided to the floor and transformed, standing barefoot in the center of the ruined tower as her vision gradually returned to its human limitations. She strode to the stairs and called down to the servant.

Show them in when they arrive, she said. After that, you're dismissedfor the night and the day to follow. Tell the others.

"My lady?" was the man's timid, confused reply.

Lord Morel and I will not be in residence, Cesira said. Go quickly.

"Yes, my lady."

My lady, Cesira repeated to herself. Gods help her. She had to get out of Amn. The audience she was about to endure would be her last in this wtetched city, she vowed.

If she survived it.

The scteams of night hunters greeted Kail's eats as he waited outside Varan's chamber. "Hurry, Meisha," he said.

"We're coming." Meisha stepped out into the passage, guiding the old wizard by the arm. He stumbled on legs unused to walking, but Meisha steadied him, whispering to him constantly, coaxing, encouraging, as one might handle a child-or a wild beast.

"Unwelcome," Varan murmured as they walked. "Unwelcome, unwelcome you all are. You've never died before, none of you..." He snagged Kail's arm suddenly. "But you will," he hissed.

Gently, Meisha disengaged Varan's hand and wrapped it around her arm. "Be easy, Master. We will bring you more work, more magic."

"Broken," Varan muttered. He lowered his gaze to his feet as he shuffled forward. "I'll fix them all eventually."

The net was still draped over the end of the tunnel when Kali and Meisha arrived. Laerin and Morgan lay flat on their bellies before it, watching the battle in the portal chamber. Dantane and Garavin waited some distance behind.

"How many?" asked Kail when Morgan crawled back to them.

"Dozen and a half," said Morgan. He did not sound pleased. "They fight good."

Laerin was equally subdued. "Your friend is with them," he said. "The man from your party."

Kail nodded. He should have been prepared, but it still felt as if he'd been hit with a fist. For a moment, he found himself at a loss as to how to proceed.

"The whole room's like a bottle. Meisha and the wizard can fill the room with killing," suggested Motgan, "before we set a foot inside."

"But it gives the boy, Aazen, no time to explain himself," Garavin said.

"Some of us are more concerned with not getting murdered," said Dantane coldly "If we act now, I can fill the room with lightning before they slay all the bats. It will buy the refugees more time as well."

"They're bound to have magical protection," Laerin pointed out. "A wizard of their own, at least."

"Dantane will single him or her out," Kail decided. "But Garavin's right. I want to talk to Aazen." Dantane cursed, but Kail ignored him, addressing

Meisha instead. "That's how it's going to happen. After I'm through, you're free to fill the room with fire, just leave Varan here. He'll be safe enough."

Meisha nodded. Kail watched her guide Varan to a protected nook down the tunnel while the others gathered at the tunnel mouth. The sounds of battle were fading.

Kail drew his sword and sliced away the net. A paii of men saw him coming through. They raised bows, but a voice barked out, "Hold!" before they could fire.

"My thanks for that," said Kali amiably as Aazen pulled his swotd free of a deep bat's body. He wiped the gore across the creature's furred chest. "For a moment I feared you'd come to kill me."

"We've come for the wizard," said Aazen. "Give him to us, and yout companions can leave unmolested."

"And the folk who've been plying your father's newest ttade for these last years? What will their fate be?" Kail asked.

"Does it matter?" Aazen countered. "My only interest now is Varan. Let him go, Kail. He is too far gone to care what company he keeps, so long as he is allowed to continue his wotk. He'll be safe with us."

"Too many people have enjoyed your father's version of 'safe' over the years, Aazen," said Kail. "Yourself included. We both know neither of us is getting out of here without fighting our way out. Your father sent you to kill me."

"Yes," said Aazen.

"He's done it before. But you couldn't betray me then, and I don't believe you'll betray me now. Why not come with me this time, old friend?"

"You still don't understand," said Aazen. "My choice was made a long time ago. I cannot disobey my father. He is all I have."

"You had mel" Anger and long-buried resentment sparked to life within Kail. "You could have started a new life. You could have escaped him."

"As you escaped your father?" Aazen said coldly. "Where has your freedom-the freedom /won for you-brought you, Kali? Right back to Amn and the arms of the merchants, right back to the edge of death, only this time, I won't be there to save you."

"It's not the same."

"Oh, but it is," said Aazen bitterly. "Our deeds are unforgivable, I grant you. I have no illusions about my life. But your father was as ruthless a murderer as mine."

"No."

"His actions sprang from the same darkness of heart. Why do you think friendship blossomed so easily between them? They were two similar creatures who came into conflict with one another."

"My father was nothing like Balram!" Kail spat.

"He was brought down, crippled long before death, but if he'd been left unchecked, his cruelties might have come to rival Balram's. Yet you've devoted your life to avenging him and restoring what he lost through his own folly. You never gave half so much thought to Haig's legacy, did you? How terrified you must have been to even face his memory."

"You know nothing of Haig."

"But I know you, Kail. You stand before me in a cage as complex and binding as my own, and you have the gall to promise to free me?" Aazen laughed. "We are both trapped. We can only claw at each other from our prisons. The loser in this contest may end up being the fortunate one."

"Is that the way it's to be, then?" said Kali sadly. "Is that what you tmly want, Aazen?"

The question seemed to stit his friend, and for a breath something faltered in Aazen's gaze. Kail took a step forward, but Aazen recoiled, falling behind the men with bows. "Kill him," he said cleaily.

At close range, the arrows were a blur. Kail only saw the twin jets of flame. The missiles burned up in mid-flight.

Meisha matetialized next to Kail, het eyes red as she stated down the bowmen. His friends appeared in a swarm as Dantane's invisibility cloak fell away.

Garavin swung his maul, smashing aside the bows. Theit bearers fell back out of reach of the massive weapon and broke their protective flank around

Aazen. Borl ran alongside his master, snarling and herding them into a corner of the room.

Morgan and Laerin fought side by side with swotds and daggers. They formed a rough wall for Meisha and Dantane to cast spells behind while Kali separated from the group and chased after Aazen.

Two heads of white-gold hair met him as Isslun and her twin crowded him from Aazen's othet side.

"Never turn down two at once," sang Isslun as the twins attacked in unison. She slashed high, almost lazily, aiming for Kail's throat. Her sister ducked under the strike and came up in a burst of speed at his guard.

Kali crouched, sweeping aside Aliyea's blade. "How you survived the years since our last meeting"-he came up under her sword, forcing her to follow him back to his feet-"is a mystery." He danced to one side, spinning so that Isslun was between him and Aliyea's attack. "They've been hard years, though, haven't they?" he taunted. He slashed his swotd in a mimic of Isslun's strike, tracing the line of a white scar running along the woman's jaw. Isslun flinched, and Kali came at her. He shifted his grip, changed the direction of his swing and cut a much deeper line across Isslun's stomach. She let out a shocked gasp, clutching at her abdomen.

Aliyea shouted her sistet's name in rage. She drew a dagger from her belt and hurled it over her sister's shoulder as Isslun crumpled to the floor. Kail spun away, but the fang sunk into his arm, and pierced through to the other side of the muscle. Pain tan a

fire trail up his arm. Kali dropped back, kicking out with his foot to sweep Aliyea's legs out from under her as she charged him. She fell, but she grabbed the dagger hilt protruding from Kail's arm as she went down.

Kail felt muscle tear when the blade came free sideways, carving a hunk of flesh from his arm. Aliyea's eyes glinted maliciously as he cried out from the pain. She gripped the dagger with both hands and raised it above her head.

The dagger burst into flame. Aliyea's eyes widened. She released the burning weapon with a yelp of pain. In one movement, Kali snatched it out of the air, turned, and plunged it through a gap in her armor. The fingers of his maimed arm came away blistered from the fire. His stab wound bled liberally, making him lightheaded, but he had no time to bind it. The cavetn swirled with fighters, far more of them foes. He jumped to his feet and over the twins, making his way to Garavin, who stood closest.

Near the rim of the chasm, the dwarf danced atop the ring of stones encircling the pit, swinging his maul angle-out, like a pendulum, to keep three Shadow Thieves at bay. Despite his heavy tread, the dwarf moved among the rocks as if he strode through mist, using his weight to lever the maul.

In the end, two of the men leaped forward. The man to Garavin's left swung a light flail in imitation of Garavin's maul.

Garavin feinted toward him but broke to the right, striking the second man a quick, snapping blow

across the kneecap. The man's leg went out, and he was down, scrabbling on the rocks to keep from falling into the pit.

The distraction allowed the dwarf to focus on the flail. The spiked ball wtapped around the handle of his weapon. The chain cinched tight.

Instead of grappling with the larger man, Garavin relinquished his weapon to keep his footing. The man yanked his maul away. Garavin clasped his holy symbol and mouthed a fast prayer. The triumphant smile disappeared off his opponent's face. The maul turned upright, floating in the air as if held by invisible hands.

The man gaped at the rotating weapon. The maul shot out ovet the chasm, dtagging the flail chain and its owner with it. The thief lost his grip on the weapon and pitched headfirst into the dark.

Garavin snagged his maul and the flail before they fell, turning with both weapons to the second man on the rocks.

He brought the maul around as the man swung an axe blade in a reverse chop aimed at Garavin's chin. The dwarf blocked the b)ow, but the weight of both weapons was too great, and the impact of the axe dtove him back hard. He skirted the lip of the chasm. The axeman lunged forward to try to force him the rest of the way into the pit.

A blast of hot ait caught the dwarf from behind, pushing him forward. He smashed the maul through the axeman, clipping his opponent in the ribs. Bones cracked audibly, and the man fell back. Gatavin

thtew a quick salute skywatd, where Meisha hovered above his head.

The cavern's ceiling was alive with aerial battle. Dantane and Meisha flew around each other, using stalactites for cover as they engaged the Shadow Thief wizard and his two protectors-a younger man and woman who appeared to be apprentices. Theit hands moved in frantic, mimicking circles, weaving spell-shields for their master.

Meisha hurled her last two stilettos. The blades caught fire as they spun through the ait. One burning missile caught the woman in the thigh, forcing her to break rhythm to put out the flames licking her robes.

"Dantane!" Meisha cried., but the wizard was already casting. With one palm atop the other, his ringers flush in a rough X shape, Dantane yelled, "Krevatcya, dannan shoe!"

The woman let out a desperate shout, but she couldn't get the spell out in time. A ball of black energy formed under Dantane's hands and streaked down to hit the other wizard in the chest, ruining whatever spell he'd been preparing. Instead of dissipating, the black energy mass crawled along his skin, trailing electrical sparks that singed his robes. The wizard tried to claw the ball off, gasping when his hands met a jolt of painful electricity.

Meisha spared Dantane a glance, but the wizard wasn't looking at het. He'd paused to witness the effects of his own spell. The black energy sizzled along the wizard's flesh. Dantane seemed detached, analytical as he watched it.

Thumb-sized teardrops of flame appeared, one above each of the fingers of Meisha's open palm. She murmured an incantation, and the flames began to spin in a circle like tiny stars. They shot across the cavern, peppering the wizard's apprentices with tiny firebursts. Protection spells flickered and peeled away as the wizard continued to grapple with the dark, killing energy.

Meisha grabbed the stalactite for leverage and swung around the base. She started to drop down and felt a painful coldness shoot up her leg. Whirling, putting her back to the stalactite, Meisha saw another thief crawling along the walls, his hands and feet covered with the same sticky climbing aid Talal had taken from the halfling. He held a barbed whip in one hand and a blade between his teeth.

Meisha put a hand over her thigh where the whip had ripped away cloth and flesh above her boot's cuff. She was in the crossfire of the wizard and the whip-wielder now, and the man's whip obviously bore some type of enchantment, for her leg was rapidly going numb with the cold.

She looked below. Morgan was nearest, but he bled liberally from a gash across his eyebrow. He ran below her to aid Garavin.

Her mind worked rapidly. Meisha pointed at the man on the wall, holding her arm out almost perpendicular to her body, affording him an easy target. He took the bait.

The whip snapped out, circling her arm, driving its barbs in deep. Cold spasms shot up to her elbow.

Meisha clenched her teeth against the pain and called the fire. She prayed it would be enough to siphon off the cold. She pictured the whip in het mind-the shape, the coil of tope and spines when it lay at rest, then up, into human hands, ready to strike, to steal her life-force…

Fire filled her veins, coiled out from her trembling finger. She sent a jet spiraling along the whip's length, all the way up the thief s arms. The fire whip slashed across his face, leaving a red line between his nose and his ear.

The man shrieked and raised his hands to his face. His grip on the ceiling faltered, and he fell to dangle above the tumult by his legs.

Meisha did not linger to see if he would drop. Her arm fell uselessly to her side, aching with the pressure of a thousand needles. She pushed off the stalactite with her good leg and flew to a corner, putting her back to the wall for some cover.

The battle below was growing more and more desperate. For all their skill, they were outnumbered. Where was Dantane?

Then Meisha saw him, flying up from the ground. He intercepted a stream of missiles from the wizard, who'd managed to rid himself of the black energy but not its effects. The electtical ball had burned his robes away at the chest, exposing singed hair and blistered skin. His face ttembled with rage. Dantane smiled and cast another spell.

"Dantane!" she cried.

"Are you all right?" the wizatd asked when he flew up to join her. He came in at an angle to examine her leg.

"Forget it," said Meisha. "The arm's worse. I can't cast, not for a while."

"We don't have that long," Dantane teplied. He rummaged in a pocket of his robes.

"We're not going to make it." Meisha leaned her head back against the wall. She was sweating. So hot…

Dantane pressed a vial between her limp fingers. "Drink this. Stay here," he said. "I'll get to Kail."

Meisha started to ask what that would serve, but she saw something across the cavern that stole the breath from her body.

Talal, clutching one of her boot daggers-she hadn't even known it was missing-was sneaking up behind one of the men fighting with Laerin. The half-elf saw the boy in time to check his own swing, a blow that would have cleaved through his opponenr's skull and likely taken Talal's head as well.

"Fool," Meisha whispered, a sob in her throat.

White-faced and shaking, the boy reared back and stabbed the Shadow Thief. The boy wasn't strong, but he had four years of pent-up hatred and grief driving the blow. Meisha didn't see where the blade penetrated, but the man stiffened. Blood trailed from the corner of his mouth. Laerin danced to the side to avoid being borne to the floor with the body.

He was just in time to catch Talal as he, too, pitched forward unsteadily. Laerin pushed the boy behind him.

Across the cavern, Kali saw Dantane flying toward him. He pulled his blade out of a Shadow Thief and moved to meet him, but another figure rose up in the wizard's path. Kali stepped aside, expecting Dantane to hurl a spell at the fool. Then he saw the tattered robes, the wild hair…

"Varan!" he heard Meisha shout, but the din of battle reduced her cry to nothing.

Dantane saw the wizard too late. He tried to pull up, but flew straight into an invisible wall. The impact sent him reeling backward. He lost control of the flight spell and fell to the cavern floor at Varan's feet.

The fire beast howled in triumph. In his mind's eye, he forced the wizard to crawl to the man lying prone on the ground.

Bring them, the beast thought. He bore down on the link between his mind and the wizard's, pressing mental tongues of flame against Varan's will. He enjoyed reducing the wizard to little more than a dog, herding his prey to exactly whete he wanted them.

Embrace our bond, the beast cooed, and heard the silent screams of the wizard ttying to resist the mental command. Join me, and witness power unimaginable. I know your thoughts. Isn't that what you've always wanted? Who would deny such a dream?

The wizard sobbed pitifully, and the beast reached out to stroke him again with fire and claws. He gloried in the ensuing screams, as the wizard went to catry out the beast's will.

Kail broke into a run, heedless of the danger. Cold dread welled up inside him. He swept aside a blade that came at his flank and kept going. He was almost to Dantane when pain exploded in the back of his neck.

Kali went down in a protective crouch. He swung around and saw the halfling reloading his sling. Aazen motioned the halfling back and stepped to block Kail's path. Behind him, Varan rolled Dantane's unconscious body over, feeling inside the wizard's robes. He removed the pottal key and turned. Kail saw his face clearly for the first time.

Vatan looked terrified.

Kali sprang up. He raised his weapon to cut a path, but Aazen was there, his blade ringing off Kail's enchanted sword. "I need him alive," Aazen said, shoving Kail back.

"He'll kill us all!" Kali swung the blade high, angling it at his best friend's head. He did it without thinking, putting killing force behind the blow.

Aazen ducked, maneuvering to attack from Kail's wounded side. Kail twisted and blocked, but was forced to tetreat a step away from Varan.

"That's it, Kail," said Aazen, stalking forward, inviting Kali to continue his attack. "This is exactly how I need you to be."

Kali swung again, bewildeted. Had Aazen gone mad as well? "Meisha!" he shouted. If she could get Varan's attention, get through to him, they might have a chance.

Varan took the key and crawled to the dark pit. Tears streamed from his good eye, and he clutched the empty socket, making pitiful mewling noises as he moved.

"Please, don't!" Varan cried as he approached the edge of the chasm. He stared down into the. dark, his terror magnified by whatever he saw. "Don't make me!" He grabbed the pouch at his neck, as if to tear it away. His hands locked into claws around the bag, and he screamed. With a violent motion, he reached inside the pouch and pulled out something small and black. Fumbling, he pressed the object against his empty socket.

It was an eye, Kail realized, but it was no human orb.

Black, with thteady gray veins bulging from the sides, the eye was too large for the space Varan intended. Kali watched, sickened, as the wizard forced the otgan into place with a howl of agony.

Varan lifted the stolen portal key in his other hand and slammed it down against the rocks. Words of power, dredged up from some unwilling place deep inside him, spilled out into the darkness.

The cavern began to shake in great, wracking tremors. Light flared, a halo that burst from the chasm, momentarily blinding everyone in the cavern. Meisha tried to fly, but a falling stalactite struck her

out of the air. The blow knocked her senseless. She dropped, straight toward the pit.

Kail saw her fall, saw her body disappear into the green light. He cried out in wordless grief that manifested in a jarring blow against Aazen's sword.

She was gone, Kali thought. He hadn't been able to save her a fret all.

Grief melted into rage. Kail batted aside Aazen's unresisting blade and knocked him to the floor. Fot a moment, he fought the urge to keep going, to run his blade through Aazen's heart. "Kali!" Morgan cried.

Chest heaving, Kail tote himself away from his friend's prone body and ran for the chasm. The cavetn was still shuddering. The tremors seemed to come from deep below ground. More stalactites and rock shook free of the ceiling and dropped in a deadly rain. He dodged a spear that plunged to the floor where he and Aazen had just been fighting. Aazen had gotten to his feet and was looking to his own remaining men, issuing commands Kail could not hear over the rumbling.

Kail made it to Dantane. He hauled the wizard up into a sitting position. Varan had collapsed on the stones.

Dantane opened his eyes. They widened-he grabbed Kail by his uninjured forearm. " 'Ware!" he cried.

Kail reversed his blade, stabbing backward blindly, but Garavin was already there, using his maul to pluck a Shadow Thief off his feet like a rag doll.

"We have to go!" the dwarf shouted over the rumbling. "The place'll come down on out heads."

"Tunnel's blocked!" called Laerin from the far side of the cavern. He held Morgan by one shoulder, Talal the other. They limped across the room to join the group. The Shadow Thieves' left alive had ceased their attacks in light of the greater danger. "It'll take a while to cleat it."

"We don't have any time," said Kail.

"It's anothet portal," Dantane said, pointing to the glowing gteen halo, which had fotmed over the chasm tathei than the shaft above. "The wizard wanted someone to go through it."

"Like Hells," said Morgan. "I say we go back through the shaft-take our chances with the Shadow Thieves."

Kail stated down the chasm. "Meisha's down there," he said. "She may still be alive. The test of you use the key to activate the othet portal once I'm gone, but I'm going through this one."

Garavin called Borl to his side. "I'll take my chances with ye," he said simply.

"As will I," said Laerin.

Morgan spat. "Don't be believing him!" he said. "He's just doin' it to make me look bad." He faced the portal reluctantly. "Let's go then, if we'te goin'."

Kali helped Dantane to his feet. One by one, they stepped off the stones, into the green light, until

only he and the wizard remained.

"What about him?" asked Dantane.

Kali knew he meant Varan, but Kali stared across the room at Aazen. He'd gathered his remaining forces under a protected shelf of rock near the blocked tunnel, but even that meager cover was cracking, coming apart like the rest of the cavern.

"He's on his own," said Kali. "So are you, Dantane, if you leave now."

The wizard shook his head. "I haven't gotten my reward yet. I go with you."

"Suit youtself." They stepped off the edge, into nothingness.

CHAPTER 26

Keczulla, Amn 5Marpenoth, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

Balram stepped into Morels main hall. He felt as if time had teversed itself. Suddenly he was back in Esmeltaran, his men at his side, seeking Morel's death.

But the setting had changed, and it wasn't Morel or his son who faced him from the top of the ballroom staircase. A woman stood there, wrapped in a hooded cloak, her face painted in forest colors. A long spear rested comfortably in the crook of her right arm. She looked like a savage carved from stone-beautiful and cold-staring at him as if she craved his death.

"Lady Morel." He bowed in greeting, allowing his men to fan out across the hall. If she was intimidated by the show of strength, her expression did nothing to give it away. She walked down the stairs, her soft boots padding against the wood. She stopped on the first landing.

"Might I have the pleasure of knowing you?" Balram asked when she said nothing.

Certainly, sir, she replied, but Balram could not hear her voice. He could only follow the movement of her lips to make out her words. She tipped her spear horizontal and threw. A soft, singing chime filled the ballroom. The spear impaled the man standing just

to Balram's left, one who'd been taking slow steps toward the base of the stairs.

Keeping his eyes trained on the woman, Balram bent to see that the man was dead. As he did so, his eyes fell on the druid's spear. Tied among its decorations was the emerald-stone symbol of Motel. When Balram's fingers brushed it, the woman spoke again. This time her voice rang out cleat across the hall, making Baltam startle.

I am Cesira of the Starwater Six, Quiet One ofSilvanus, and the lady of this house-she inclined her head stiffly-and the doom of Balram Kortrun. She glided back a step and pressed her hand to the banister rail in a certain spot.

Balram's eyes widened in shocked recognition. Gods, she couldn't know the locations of the…

"Fall back!" he cried, much too late.

The floot tiles funning down the center of the hall creaked from years of lying stationary, but the trap still functioned.

Spikes exploded from the floor, catching the men behind him in a deadly hedge. Two went down as the sharpened edges burst through the backs of their legs. The rest managed to leap away, but the trap had cut them off from the exit.

Balram turned to the stairs, but Cesira had climbed back to the top. She stood behind the balcony rail, a second spear resting on her shoulder.

"You won't get out of here alive, bitch," he snarled at hef. He motioned to one of his men, who began moving along the outer wall, smashing lanterns and spilling oil in streams across the floor. Fire licked up in tall pools. "You'll burn with this house, if we don't get to you first."

Then by all means, Cesira said, holding out her arms, Come to me.

The fire beast exalted in his find. Magic raged wildly above his head, fueled by the mad wizard and theif mental link. The mortals were scattered throughout his domain. He could smell them leaving their imprints on the Delve in a complex web, moving, trying to find each other.

The woman of fire and one other-they were closest to his former prison. The beast dismissed them at once as too easy. Let them have a start on the game. He relished the challenge of two well-prepared magic wielders.

His senses drifted outward. Two more were near the thoroughfare, and a larger party was across the bridges-but wait. The beast picked out the scent, distantly, in the Howling burrow. Four fighteis, moving stealthily-deeper into the mazelike tunnels construcred by the dwarves.

There lay his hunt, a chase through the labyrinth to claim the fitst of his prizes.

The beast rumbled in satisfaction. He stretched his lean muscles and began to run, tracing the faint scents to their source.

Meisha felt as if her bones had been dashed over rocks. Perhaps they had been. She felt a hand prod her shoulder and hadn't even the strength to fight it off.

"Meisha."

Dantane's face swam into focus. The wizard leaned over her with a vial in his hand identical to the one he'd given her in the portal room. "Drink," he said, putting the glass to her lips.

Meisha drank, and gradually felt the strength returning to her aching arm and leg. The magic faded, leaving only a dull pain. "Where are we?"

"We came through a second portal," Dantane said. His voice sounded odd, uncertain. "The chasm in the floor. I found you not far from where I appeared. I don't know where we are, but you need to see something."

"What is it?" she asked.

Dantane hesitated. "I believe it's you."

"What?" Meisha sat up, gazing over the wizard's shoulder.

She recognized where they were immediately. The circular chamber was crowded with pedestals of rock rising up four, six, sometimes ten feet into the air, separating the chamber into various levels. Two exits lay at opposite ends of the room. At the ends of those tunnels would be similar testing chambers. "The star," she murmured.

Meisha suddenly realized they weren't alone. She looked up at the shortest pedestal, where a child stood. She was bald but for a dark fuzz beginning to sprout from the top of her head. She waved her arms in the motions of a spell. Below her, a man in well-kept robes watched her casting with a critical eye.

Varan-but not the mad wizard trapped in the Delve. This Varan was whole, and appeared much younger. For Meisha, seeing the little girl was like seeing a ghost.

"We're in a testing chamber," she said, for Dantane's benefit. "Varan designated one for each apprentice, arranged like the points of a star. When I was here, these caves could only be reached through Varan. He teleported us down."

"You didn't know the portal led down here?" asked Dantane.

"No. I didn't know Varan knew of the portal," she admitted. "The markings on it don't match his sigils. Perhaps that was how he discovered the secret tunnels," she murmured, half to herself, "through the portal."

"There are more caverns?" Dantane prompted. "Do you know where?"

"Varan said they adjoined the testing chambers somehow. We looked, as apprentices, but the entrance was magically concealed. I suppose it's possible, now his othet magics are breaking down, that the connecting passage has been revealed."

"So we'll have to explote each chambet," Dantane said. "Our companions might be there, or in the other tunnels." He looked at het. "Do you know what they contained?"

Meisha laughed humorlessly. "Whatever.great Art the Howlings saw fit to stote. You were deposited in the wrong place, Dantane, if you seek treasure down here."

The wizard grimaced. "Such seems to be the course of my life," he said.

Meisha stood up, her eyes drawn back to the phantom image atop the pedestal. She watched, fascinated, as the air in front of her double seemed to split in two. Out of the breach came the head of a being that only vaguely resembled a human. Hairless, outlined in white flame, it stared at its summoner curiously. Though she felt no heat, Meisha recalled well how the air around the creature rippled with burning. It was the first time she'd ever interacted with a fire elemental.

The scene blurred and faded, leaving them alone in the chamber.

"What was that?" asked Dantane.

"A memory," answered Meisha, "from soon after I came to the Delve. I was a Wraith-half-feral-in Keczulla, when Varan found me. He took me on as an apprentice because he sensed my talent. I remember when he brought me down here to converse with the fire elemental. I could feel it burning, just like I burned inside. It's part of every savant's training, to recognize how their spirit matches the element

they've chosen. With proper training, eventually, the spirit melds with that force and becomes part of it," Meisha said, her voice oddly hushed.

"Is that what you aspire to?" Dantane asked, "to join with the fire and become as an elemental crearure?"

She glanced at him. "It's what every savanr wants." "But do you?"

Without answering, Meisha stood up, her eyes scanning the floor where the phantom images had been. "There." She bent down, lifting a small piece of glittering crystal from the floor. "The source of the memories," she explained.

"Your master's work," Dantane said, impressed. "He has great power."

"Obviously, not enough," Meisha said, "01 he failed to follow his own teachings."

Had Varan recorded all his past sessions with his apprentices? she wondered, and if so, how many crystals, how much Art would be required for such a task?

"Why do you despise him so much?" Dantane asked. "He awoke the power in you. Without it, you might have died a Wraith."

"I know," Meisha said. "He cared about me, as much as he was capable of such feelings. He offered me magic and a place in his world, but I couldn't accept it."

"Why not?"

"Because if I hadn't possessed that power and if Varan hadn't sensed it, he would have passed me by on that stteet without looking twice. It was the power that fascinated him most, not any of us. And yet, I still wanted to love him."

"Then why did you come back?" Dantane asked. "Why help him now?"

"Because he was right. He was the only one who understood me, and I still love him for that," Meisha said bleakly. "That bond-the one I see teflected in Kail's group-I've known nothing like it, not since the night Shaera left the candle in my room."

"Shaera?"

"It doesn't matter." Meisha waved the memories away. "She's gone now-they'te all dead-and Varan is not the mastet I knew."

"What about the boy," Dantane persisted, "the one who followed you?"

"Talal," Meisha said, and something inside her constricted. She'd avoided thinking about the boy. "Talal is... he has no scrap of magical power in him, and yet I find myself wanting to mentor him, in life, if not in the Art. It's sttange. Then, in the next breath, I remember what I am and what I could do. When I remember, I want to put him as far from myself as I possibly can."

"It seems he would choose otherwise," Dantane observed.

Meisha shook her head grimly. "I pray that choice doesn't bring about his doom," she said, "if it has not already."

She touched the ctystal, and the phantom Varan appeared again, drawing Meisha's attention back to the pedestals. This time the apprentice was not Meisha, but a young man with short blond hair cropped in a bowl shape.

"Prieces," Meisha said. "The earth savant. I've never seen this."

The young man appeared pale and drawn, even by the blurry magic illuminating the memory, His gestures wete not as crisp as the child-Meisha's had been. His arms weighed heavily with fatigue, but he pressed on under Varan's encouraging gaze.

The earth elemental crawled up from the ground opposite Varan, but it was bigger-twice as broad as the creatute Meisha had helped to summon. The force of its arrival shook the cavern, knocking Prieces from the pedestal. Varan reacted instantly, throwing out a spell to keep the apprentice from injuring himself. He didn't see the earth elemental smash the pedestal Prieces was standing on in half. Stone shards flew, striking Varan in the back. The wizard turned, intending to banish the creature, Meisha thought, but the thing rose up, crashing headfirst into the ceiling. Cracks fissured through the stone, and the chamber, unstable from all the tunnels carved in one place, began to come apart.

The elemental thrashed wildly, seeking release. It picked up the shattered pieces of the pedestals and

threw them. The flat portion hit the wall and fell back, crushing Prieces beneath it.

Meisha cried out and ran forward. Dantane caught her arm. "It is an illusion. It isn't real," he hissed in her ear.

"But it did happen," Meisha whispered. She watched helplessly as Varan shouted an incantation that blew the stone aside, into the earth elemental. The force of the spell knocked the creature backward off its massive feet, giving Varan time to levitate Prieces to safety, but it was too late. The body of the unfortunate apprentice hung limply in the air, his neck broken.

Varan turned, chanting a spell that finally banished the elemental. The wizard collapsed to his knees next to Prieces. Stone continued to fall, but he erected a magical barrier that deflected the falling rock.

"Look there," said Dantane, pointing across the chamber.

The back wall of the cavern had completely caved in, revealing anothet set of passages that curved and split off in the darkness. Within them, a light burned, but Varan was oblivious to it.

"Is that another testing chamber?" asked Dantane.

Meisha shook her head. "There should be nothing behind that wall but solid rock."

They watched the strange light grow brighter, and as the rumbling gradually ceased, another sound

filled the silence- the tap-tap of what sounded like rain on a campfire.

The light flickered and went out, but only because an object had passed in front of it, a swift, blutry movement not unlike the fire elemental.

Not rain, Meisha thought, as the thing coalesced, taking on shape and substance, but claws.

Dantane gasped when he saw what the walls had imprisoned. "Impossible," he said.

Laerin hauled Morgan to his feet. The rogue's boots skidded on a pile of bones. Morgan regained his footing and cursed a loud, long streak that echoed down the tunnel.

"See how you corrupt the children," Laerin tutted, shooting a wink at Talal.

Talal didn't share the humor. He was still on the ground, shards of broken bone digging into his knees.

"Where are we?" he asked. He dislodged an oblong skull from a pile. "What are all these?"

"Animal remains," Laerin surmised, taking the skull from him. "Wolves of great size. They all died here together."

"In pieces," Morgan said. His head perked up. "Quiet."

Talal listened and heatd the echo of footsteps. Swiftly, Morgan picked up the remains of a battered

rib cage and smashed it into the face of a Shadow Thief as he came around the corner.

The thief went down, and Motgan put his boot on the man's neck.

"Brittle pieces." Morgan sniffed. He cast away the shredded bone cage.

"Is he harmless?" Laerin asked. The squirming thief was trying to reach a dagger clipped in his boot.

Morgan pressed harder, until the man choked. "As kitten teats." he grinned.

"Let me talk to him." Laerin squatted next to the thief. "Where are the others?" he asked calmly.

"Your friends or mine?" the thief rasped. He spat blood in Laerin's face.

The half-elf wiped the dripping red trails. "This one's as lost as we are," he told Morgan. "Have you ever been down here before?" he asked the man.

"No," the thief said, for he couldn't shake his head under the weight of Morgan's boot. "We've never been in these tunnels."

"Think Meisha knows about this place?" Talal asked hopefully.

"Maybe, but I wouldn't wager on finding her soon," Morgan said, "if this place's as vast as it seems." He pointed to three tunnels splitting off the cavern, all stretching an indeterminate distance before branching again.

"We'd better start looking," Laerin said. "Let me scout ahead."

"What do we do with him?" Talal asked, indicating the thief.

"Trap trigger," Morgan said cheerfully. "We'll move faster that way, with him testing the path ahead of us."

"Clear," Laerin declared, trotting back up the passage. "Narrow, but more likely to be free of traps. These caves are buried too deep to be heavily protected."

"Cheerful thought for this one," said Morgan, dragging the Shadow Thief to his feet. He shone his last torch over the walls. "Not one of these tunnels looks to be sloping up. They're all going deeper underground. Anything look familiar?" he asked, nudging Talal.

Talal shook his head. "Where do you think the othets are?" he asked, though he feared the answet. He'd seen Meisha fall down the chasm.

"Portals malfunction," said Laerin. "When that happens, they can deposit a person off the mark from where they intended to appeat-a few feet, a mile..."

"Into a wall," Morgan muttered, and Talal's heart wrenched.

Laerin squeezed his shoulder and sent Morgan a quelling glance. "The portal is old," he said, "but I believe it to be sound. We'll find them."

"I suppose mote of them damn shadow mongrels got scattered about, too," said Morgan.

"That might be a blessing," said Laerin. "If they followed us and are separated, we may have a better chance of overcoming them. Speaking of which..." The half-elf drew his dagger and prodded the Shadow Thief in the back. "Heatty congratulations," he told the man, "you're taking point. Stray too far ahead and you'll find my blade between your shoulders."

The thief nodded cut tly, and the group set off with him and Laerin leading.

The first tunnel bent to the right, then bent back on itself so shatply that the way was impassable for even Talal; they had to backtrack to the second tunnel.

Morgan made slash marks on the walls with a crusty piece of chalk to show where they'd been.

The center tunnel connected three larger chambers. A blackened firepit in the center of the first room suggested a kitchen; fragments of rotting wood might once have served as furniture.

"Living quarters," Laerin said. "If the Howlings did dwell all the way down here, they lived sparsely."

"The tunnel's are defensible," Morgan said. "Long bottlenecks, mazelike. And if the portal's the only way down, they can dig themselves in cozy if they have to."

"I have a hard time believing the dwarves would rely on magic alone to move them through the

earth," said Laerin. "It's not their nature."

Talal gazed down the third tunnel. The passage spilled into a long, natrow chamber. Chipped and sheared stalagmites formed stone benches. A dozen men would have fit comfortably in the room, Talal thought, but the benches squatted close to the floor to accommodate shortet legs.

At the back of the room, situated in front of another tunnel, a wide altar rose up from the floor. Spiky writing was etched deep into the stone, but a crack cut a jagged line down the center of the monument.

Talal watched Morgan and Laerin examine the writing. The half-elPs lips moved as if he could read the words. His face creased in consternation.

"What does it say?" Talal asked.

The half-elf cocked his head. "The script is Dwarvish, of course. It's an altar to Abbathor, the dwarf god of greed."

Talal knew nothing of the dwarf gods, not enough to blaspheme them, anyway. He would have to ask Meisha about Abbathor.

The thought of the Harper sent an unexpected stab of pain through his chest. If she's alive, she's safer than you are, Talal told himself. He was the fool. He'd had the opportunity to escape and see daylight again, but he'd wasted it worrying over a fire-twisted Harper he barely knew.

His thoughts shattered when a sharp blow cuffed the side of his head.

"Watch him!" Laerin shouted, and the half-elf was suddenly in front of Talal, shielding him with his body.

Dizzy and in pain, Talal heard Morgan grunt and, a breath later, the sound of a body dropping on stone.

Laerin's arm caught his. "Are you all right?"

Talal wiped blood from his temple where the Shadow Thief had struck him. "Second time they've roughed up my head," he mumbled.

Laerin grinned. "Luckily you keep nothing important up there." His face sobered. "Forgive me, I should have been watching him more closely." He turned to Morgan, who was wiping blood from his sword. "Dead?"

Morgan nodded. "Hope you were done questioning him."

"I was," Laerin replied, taking one last look at the altar. "A pity Garavin isn't here. He would have wanted to see this."

They headed for the tunnel at the back of the temple, but Talal stopped abruptly. His head still felt fuzzy from the blow. He wondered if he were imagining things. "Did you hear that?" he asked.

Morgan and Laerin continued ahead of him. "Keep up," grunted Morgan.

"It sounded like… rain."

They moved past an intersection of four tunnels. Laerin choose to keep going straight, but the sound persisted just at the edges of Talal's hearing. He wondered why the half-elf couldn't heat the steady beat, water against stone.

Talal glanced behind and saw movement in the darkness of the intersection. "Look at that!"

Laerin turned, following the streak of Morgan's pointing torch.

A dwarf ran into the intersection. He was bald, dressed in plated armor that should have creaked loudly in the stillness. His short legs skidded on the loose dirt, but he caught himself with a hand on the ground. He half-turned toward them, and Talal gasped.

The entire left side of the dwarPs face was gone, exposing white skull and a length of jawbone. Torchlight flickered off the shadows and hollows created by the missing flesh. No one could be that injured and live. The dwarf was dead, Talal thought, just like the one he and Meisha had encounteted in the upper tunnels. He was dead, and he was running. None of the other ghosts had run, and none had looked at Talal with such terror-filled eyes.

The dwarf regained his feet and plowed on down the tunnel. The sound of rain drew closer.

"Talal," said Laerin, drawing his sword, "Run. Down the passage-now!"

Talal felt the half-elf shove him hard. He stumbled and fell, unable to take his eyes off the intersection.

Fear crawled along his body. A breeze passed over his skin, bringing heat and a scent that made his eyes water. The tunnel suddenly felt humid. Steam pools rose up from the floor, and the sound of rain became a sizzling.

Talal crushed his eyes shut, and time seemed to slow, as if he were experiencing everything from a great distance. He opened his eyes in time to see a shape pass through the intersection, filling it utterly with weight and light. The timeless silence shattered, sundered by a roar that filled the caverns, knocking Morgan and Laerin to their knees.

Talal covered his ears and screamed, but he could not hear the sound of his voice over the terrible roar. Morgan and Laerin crouched beside him, shielding him with their bodies and weapons. They, too, seemed incapable of movement.

The beast's head looked vaguely like that of a lion. A full, red mane streamed out behind it, stained with black ash from an ember fire. His body, as it stretched into the tunnel after the dwarf, filled the length of the intersection. Huge, muscled haunches tapered to four black-clawed feet that scraped furrows in the stone. The rain sound was the sizzle of the demon's claws, constantly burning where they touched the earth.

Talal watched, transfixed, as the creature drew his head out of the tunnel. In his jaws struggled the dead dwarf. The beast bit through its shoulder, and the dwarf's screams were as loud and pitiful as any living being's. It was the screaming that finally galvanized them.

Morgan grabbed Talal by one arm, Laerin by the other, and they ran down the tunnel at breakneck speed, careening around corners at random.

Morgan cursed liberally. "What the bloody piss and Hells is it?" he shouted.

"A demon," said Laerin grimly. "Meisha's beast. The doom of the Howlings."

"A jarilith," said Dantane as the phantom image of the creature stepped into the chamber. "A tanarri-a hunting beast from the Abyss."

The demon leaped at Vatan. The battle that ensued was horrificaHy beautiful to watch. Varan hurled spells that ravaged the left side of the creatures face, removing the jarilith's eye. Enraged, the demon sprang forward, curling around the wizard. The jarilith raked his claws sideways along the wizatd's flank.

Varan retreated, trying to heal himself with a ciacked potion vial, but he bled from dozens of small wounds. He grasped the demon's lost eye and chanted. The words spilled out, booming with powet, and it seemed he would complete the magic before the beast could launch another attack.

But the demon charged, tangling with the release of the Art. Tremors shook the cavern, and suddenly, Varan clutched the left side of his face. His mouth twisted in agony.

Horrified, Meisha watched the flesh beneath Varan's fingers blend together and melt, becoming a hideous mirror to the jarilith's mined visage.

The demon tossed his head in renewed frenzy, as if some invisible foe were attacking him. Clawing the stone, the jarilith fell back into the caves from whence he had come. Varan followed, crawling on his hands and knees, one arm clutched awkwardly against his face. He did not have to go far. The demon collapsed, unconscious or enspelled. Meisha could not tell which.

When the scene faded at last, Meisha saw the breached wall, just as the vision had rendered it. Empty.

"The demon's awake," said Dantane.

"I don't understand," Meisha said. "Why did he do it? Why did he stay to fight?" He could have escaped, come back when he'd tecovered from Prieces' death and the battle with the elemental, Meisha thought. Why had he fought the demon in his weakened state, using magic to merely put it to sleep?

"What was that spell?" asked Dantane.

Meisha had no idea. "It seemed to allow him to control the demon, at least in that moment."

"Through a mental connection," said Dantane, nodding. "It requires a focus. In this case-"

"The jarilith's eye," said Meisha, and the truth dawned on her. Varan hadn't been weakened or desperate when he'd cast the spell. He'd known exactly what he was doing. "Watching gods, he couldn't have wanted to keep it alive," she said.

"For curiosity's sake," Dantane affirmed. At Meisha's revolted expression, he added, "Fueled by arrogance, I grant you. Your master saw a new vehicle to test his spells and acted accordingly, believing his will would be enough to overcome the jarilith. He discovered differently, to his doom. The spell drove him mad."

Dantane's voice was coldly mattet-of-fact, but he was right. Meisha accepted the truth, though it filled her with a profound anger and disappointment in her former teachet. "Are they still linked?" she said. "Is that why Varan opened the portal and cast us down here? Is the demon fighting him for control?"

"Fighting him, fighting the dwarves," said Dantane. "There may be hope for us and your master, if that's the case."

"But if the demon escaped from Varan's spell, why is he still down here? Why has he not tried to get to the surface?"

"Can't you feel it?" Dantane asked. "The demon's aura? It's everywhere."

Meisha nodded. "I've felt it ever since I was a child. I still wake at night blanketed in the dread and the cold. I just never had a name for it before. What does that have to do with the demon's escape?"

"He doesn't want to escape," Dantane said. "From the dwarves, yes, and from Varan's control, but the Delve has been absorbing the demon's essence for a century or longer. The Delve has become part of him- the ideal hunting ground. I suspect all the demon wants is something worthwhile to hunt."

"Through Varan, he's gotten everything he needs," Meisha said bitterly. "All he has to do is pick us off one by one."

"An appealing fate for the Shadow Thieves that may have followed us," Dantane said. "In fact, without the demon's interference, we might have died at their hands."

"Astounding how the gods sott matters out," Meisha muttered. "This way," she said, leading Dantane on to the next testing chamber. "We have to move quickly. We don't know where the demon is now."

As with the other chambers, raised rock platforms dominated the next room they entered, but the entire back wall of the cavern had gone, plucked from the surrounding stone like a cork from a wine cask. Darkness, impenetrable by her spell light, stretched down a long passage Meisha had never seen before.

"A permanent tunnel of darkness," Dantane said. "Small wonder your master concealed this entrance. There will be traps and wards, unless he cleared them himself."

"Let's hope so," Meisha said. "We'll have enough to wotry about when we find the jarilith." She took stock of het weapons. Her stilettos were gone, but she still had one dagger. Fire crackled in her mind. "Ready?"

Dantane nodded and srepped forward. They were almost to the mouth of darkness when they heard the demon roar.

Talal didn't look back. He knew the creature had turned to pursue them. He could heat the sizzle-click of his paws hitting the stone. The beast's huge sttides would have overtaken them immediately if the passage hadn't kept making sharp corners.

Morgan swung around a bend and came up short, shouting, "Too narrow!"

Talal fetched up behind Laerin. He saw the bigger man wedged between two slabs of stone. Beyond lay an open chamber.

"We can't go back!" Laerin shouted, before he plowed into Motgan from behind.

Morgan's tunic ripped as Laerin's weight pushed him through the narrow gap. The half-elf followed, and Talal, grateful for once to be the slightest, had no trouble slipping through the crack.

In the chamber beyond flowed an underground river.

Talal stopped and stared at the black watet darting with shadows under the torchlight. The river rushed from a fissure in the northwest corner of the room, flowing out through a wishbone shaped crack at the opposite end. On the other side of the water, the cavern dead-ended.

Morgan crouched at the river's edge. He splashed handfuls of water on two wicked slashes across his chest where the stone had cut into his flesh. "That's got it," he wheezed. "Game's over before it began."

Talal looked at Laerin. "We're trapped," he said. "Maybe if we double back-"

A loud keening drowned out the test. Talal went down in a protective crouch, while Laerin and Morgan turned to see what had made the sound.

Curved claws raked the stone, stabbing through the gap in the rocks. Stone chips flew, and the smell of brimstone filled the chamber.

Every coherent thought fled Talal's mind. Rationally, he knew the demon couldn't penetrate the layers of rock, not quickly, but all he could hear were the claws shearing away the stone.

"Get in the water!" Morgan shouted to be heard over the awful sound. "Swim to the other side!"

Talal backed away-he'd never liked water-but Laerin dragged him into the river, and soon he was forced to swim.

The current threatened to pull him down. Talal fought it, but it took Morgan's strong arm to haul him out on the other side, else he would have been carried away.

On the opposite bank, the sound of the river muffled the demon's claws enough to allow them to talk.

Morgan, his hair dripping in lanky strands around his exhausted face, said, "Figure it drove us in here?"

Laerin nodded. "I probably cracked a pair of your ribs, pushing you through that gap. He's wearing us down."

"Not much need for that," said Morgan, "once he corners us."

"I don't think he'll do that yet," said Laerin. "He's just stretching his legs. He knows we'll get out of hete." The half-elf pointed to the wishbone in the wall. "That way."

Talal blanched. "We don't know how far the river runs, do we? That thing won't need to kill us if we drown first."

"I'm willing to bet there's another chamber nearby," said Laerin. He looked at Morgan. "What do you think? Can't be much longer than that sewet tunnel in Waterdeep."

"Least the water's cleaner," Morgan said. "I think I got enough bteath in my lungs."

Talal couldn't believe what he was hearing. They were all lunatics.

"Give me back the fire-woman," he mutteted.

"Sorry," Morgan said, "Fire can't go where we're headed." He inverted the totch he catried into the river.

Instantly, Talal went blind. The opptessive darkness of the Delve closed in around him. He felt Laerin's hand on his shoulder, prodding him toward the rushing water. Reluctantly, Talal waded back into the frigid river and let the cutrent snare him.

Treading water, he felt the downward sweep to the wishbone just before his shoulders brushed rock.

For a moment, Talal panicked. He btaced his hands on either side of the passage, tesisting the water's pull with all his strength. He didn't want to drown. He'd end up a blue corpse in the dark, and no one in Faertin would care.

"You can't fight it forever," said Morgan's voice in his ear. "But you can go on your terms."

Talal forced a steadying breath into his lungs. Calmer, he closed his eyes and remembered how it was to feel his way in the datk. He'd done it before. He could do it underwater.

Cautiously, he let his hands slide down the stones, following the curve of the wishbone.

Pretend it's a lass's legs, Dirty Bones, and stop your whining.

The watet closed over his head.

Froglike, Talal swam with the current. He kept one hand above his head to brush the stone ceiling, searching for air. The river propelled him forward at a quick pace. He sensed Morgan and Laerin beside him now and then, though he could see nothing in the dark. The water dragged at his shirt. Talal sttipped it off and left it for some deep-dweller to find.

Ten feet farther Talal's shoulder banged against something rough and unyielding. Talal hoped it wasn't alive, or if it were, that it couldn't swallow him. He kicked sideways and realized the river bent, angling off to his left. He had no choice but to follow the path.

His lungs began to burn. Unconsciously, he let a tiny gasp of air escape. The respite was brief, however, and the burning sensation that followed was excruciating.

Kicking feebly now, Talal allowed the river to carry him. His hand dragged limply across the unbroken rock ceiling. He felt no gap, no magical pocket of air to save him.

The muscles in his abdomen convulsed. His body demanded air, and in its absence was willing to drag in lungfuls of the killing water. Talal clutched his midsection, trying to hold in his last gasp.

His hand slid off the rock. Talal spasmed, sucking in a freezing cold breath. His lungs suddenly felt heavy. His muscles contorted in agony. Then the pain went away, and the cold, and Dirty Bones went to sleep.

He awoke vomiting water.

Talal heard Morgan cursing and felt the big man's arm supporting his chest as he emptied the river from his body.

When he could breathe again, Talal looked around. They were in another tunnel, but he could hear the river somewhere behind him. Morgan must have carried his body a short distance before reviving him; Talal had thought himself dead. He shivered violently at the memory of his near-drowning.

Laerin offered a hand to pull him to his feet. "We can't linger here. The creature will follow the river and fence us in again if we don't keep moving."

They moved off down yet another tunnel, but Talal trailed behind. His legs felt rubbery, and his lungs still ached. The only thing that kept him moving was the presence of the demon's frightening aura, steadily building behind them. Every time they came to an intersection, Laerin changed their direction and increased his speed. Soon they wete running again. Behind them, the sound of rain echoed in the tunnels, drawing closer.

"Keep turning!" Laerin shouted as they ran. "Out-maneuvering is the only way. If it catches us, thete won't be any toom to fight. We'll be tunning through a forest of razors."

Laerin skidded down a short, steep incline. At the end of the slide was a vast chamber that opened wide and dipped into a crater. Stalagmites, arranged like a maze, rose from the floor like ttees, forming dense clusters throughout the room. Two paths led from one side of the chamber to the other.

"Help me," said Morgan, grabbing Talal by the waist.

"Let go!" Talal kicked air in a futile attempt to win loose, but Morgan's grip was solid. Laerin came up on his other side, snagging his foot. The half-elf went to one knee and hauled upward, tossing Talal bodily into the air. He landed hard on his stomach on one of the higher platforms. The breath whooshed out of his lungs.

"Stay there!" Morgan hollered when he rolled to the edge. The echo of another roar-so damn close!-and

the sound of claws raking stone reached Talal's ears. He fought the uige to curl into a ball.

"Not enough," said Laetin. "The demon will smell him before it gets into the room."

"Suggestions welcome," Morgan growled. "Stand or run?"

Laerin regarded the two pathways through the chamber. Each led to a separate exit. "Split up," he said finally. "We'll each take a path. The boy can run along the top. With luck, it'll only be able to chase one of us. Talal can follow the other into the tunnel and hopefully find Kail."

"Awful lot of luck and hope in that plan," said Morgan, his face white.

Laerin smiled grimly. "We work with what we have," he said. He looked up. "Do you understand what we're going to do, Talal?"

Talal swallowed. "I got it," he whispered.

Laerin met Morgan's gaze steadily. "One more bet," he challenged softly. "Let it be a race."

Morgan grunted, but his grip faltered as he reached in his pouch and dropped two gold coins on the ground. "A race, then."

"Two danters?" Laerin whistled. "Heavy price." "Seemed appropriate."

A deafening crash sounded nearby, but they felt the demon's approach long before they heard his claws

again. Morgan jerked his head. "Go."

Talal crouched near the wall, ready to jump to the next stalagmite cluster. He watched Morgan and Laerin take off at a sprint down their separate corridors. He glanced at the far tunnels, willing the pair to reach them before the demon caught up. He could feel the demon coming closer. Brimstone scent crawled over his skin, into his clothes.

"Run," he whispered, "run, oh run, oh run." He chanted it like a prayer, the closest he'd ever come in his life to crying out for divine intervention. But to whom would he implore? There were no gods left that he hadn't blasphemed. None of them would believe an abrupt conversion to the faith. Talal almost smiled at that, but he was too deeply sunk in despair and the horror of the demon's aura.

Talal suppressed a whimper when the beast entered the chamber. For a long, terrible moment the beast just stood there, then he raised his head and looked straight at Talal. Talal wanted to run, heedless of the consequences. He held himself down, scratching his nails against the stone until they bled. If he ran, the beast would kill him. Talal sensed the demon testing him almost teasingly with his powers. He squeezed his eyes shut against the awful fear.

Then it was ovet. The demon passed by, charging down one of the cotridors. Talal opened his eyes and forced himself to stand, to watch the beast tun down his prey.

From his viewpoint, above the scene, Talal saw which corridor the beast chose. The figure running

before the demon-so small in comparison to the beast-never had a chance. At the last moment, he turned, his weapon brandished, and fell beneath hundreds of pounds of burning muscle.

The demon came down on the sword, howling in rage and pain, raking the body beneath him from shoulders to calves. At the same time, the beast's jaws closed on his victim's neck, snapping it with one careless jerk.

Bile burned Talal's throat. So much blood, and yet the demon tan on, trailing red prints down the passage on his hunt.

Talal didn't stop to grieve. He bolted for the other tunnel.

Kali opened his eyes when the gteen light faded. Garavin and Borl stood over him. He must have blacked out from loss of blood during the transition through the portal. The dwarf was binding his arm. His holy symbol hung away from his neck, brushing against Kail's bare flesh. Kali felt the same brief, warm jolt he'd felt years ago from the telic.

"Thought I'd lost all of ye," Gatavin murmured as Kail looked around. The thtee of them wete alone in a smaller version of the cave they'd just left. The circle of stones sat to his left, but there was no chasm in the floor or shaft above. The room was dark, but for lines of dim light shining through a paii of doots at the end of a narrow passage.

"Where are the others?" Kali asked, panic rising inside him.

"They didn't come through," said Garavin. "Or they ended up somewhere else." "Is that possible?"

"In this place, who's to say? But if this other portal is old as the Delve, and what with the wizard's magic disturbing the cavern, it may have malfunctioned and scattered us about. The others should be close by, if that's the case."

"We have to find them and get out of here," said Kali.

He headed for the light. When they drew closer, Kali realized the double doors ascended over two stories up the rock. A winch was attached to the doors to pull them open.

"I wonder if the dwarves built this," said Kail.

"Only way out," said Garavin.

They took hold of the crank together and pulled. The mechanism ground with age and neglect, but turned after a moment of coaxing. The doors ground against stone, the sounds echoing loudly in the passage. When the doors were half-open, Kali signaled Garavin to stop and peered out through the man-sized opening.

"Gods above," Kail murmured in awe.

Kail stepped out onto the narrow stone bridge that extended just beyond the double doors. Garavin and Borl came to stand beside him. A memoty surfaced, of meeting Meisha on the Star Bridge outside Keczulla. The markings on this bridge were strikingly similar, except there was no roaring river beneath

his feet, only an endless, black abyss stretching off in both directions.

Below and above, more bridges joined two steep rock walls divided like the parting of a great, barren sea. On both sides, tunnels honeycombed the walls- some were open, others secured with doors similar to the ones they'd just passed through. Blocks of a strange, clear substance obstructed three doors; they seemed to writhe and twist within the confines of the stone portals.

"What are those?" Kail asked.

Garavin looked where he pointed. "Gelatinous cubes," he said.

"Amazing," Kali murmured. For as far as he could see, thete were only the tunnels and the rock walls, and the bridges over the abyss. It was as if they'd stepped into an underground labyrinth. They had only to choose a door.

Morgan whipped around the corner and stopped, listening. Had the demon passed the chamber by or gone for the boy, despite their efforts? He dragged his blade out of its sheath. The tunnel lay open and inviting befote him, but Morgan turned his back on it. As good a place as any to make a stand, he thought, much as it pained him to let the half-elf win a bet.

Rocks showered his hair from above. Morgan swung in an upward arc but checked the blow just in time.

Talal came skidding down the stalagmite to land next to him. He paused long enough to grab

Morgan's arm, towing him along.

Morgan pushed the boy away. "Keep going," he hissed. "I'll hold it off."

"He's dead," Talal cried, plucking stubbornly at the thief s tunic. "We have to run, we have to… he'll kill us…"

The boy was hysterical. He didn't know what he was saying. Morgan tutned back to the room. "Come on!" he shouted wildly. "Come at me, you bastard!"

"Shut up," Talal squeaked. "He'll come back. We have to… have to go."

But Morgan's feet refused to move. His mind worked sluggishly: the half-elf… Morgan hadn't heard it. He'd heard nothing. What kind of thief was he, what kind of partner, not to hear when the job went wrong?

The stupid half-elf had always been faster than him. "Legs like twigs, but he moved like he weighed nothing," Morgan babbled. He tried to make the boy understand. "He should've won; we never let each other win. The arrogant bastard should be halfway back to Keczulla by now."

Talal moaned in despair. "You're crazy. That thing's going to kill us both, and it'll all be for nothing!" He pushed, but Morgan grabbed him roughly.

"Listen to what I'm telling you!" Morgan shook the boy by the shoulder, ignoring his whimper of pain. "We'll meet up with him at the next intersection. He'll be there, waiting, and then-"

His head snapped to the side. Stars filled the corners of Morgan's vision. He looked at Talal in bewildetment. It slowly dawned on him that the boy had punched him in the jaw. He raised a hand; Talal flinched. Tears streamed down his thin face.

Morgan blinked several times to clear his head. Calmly, he forced all thoughts of the half-elf to a dark corner of his mind. Later, after he had spilled enough blood, he would take them out and examine them.

He grabbed the boy by the collar, pushing him toward the tunnel. "Run fast, little mouse," he growled. "Or we're all meat." At Talal's uncertain expression, he said, "Don't worry. I'll be right behind you."

CHAPTER 27

The Howling Delve 5 Marpenoth, the

Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

Aazen tensed when he heard the distant howls. He raised a hand to halt the party, surveying what resources he had left.

Isslun and Aliyea were still above, probably slain. Tershus was there too. Falling rock had obscured Aazen's last glimpse of the halfling. The rest of his party had either been slain by Kail's group or separated by the journey through the portal. Aazen had only five left with him. One of them, Kiliren's apprentice, had to be half-carried due to his wounds. If he didn't succumb, Aazen was tempted to leave the man, especially in light of what he intended to do.

"Straight ahead, torches low unless absolutely necessary," he said. "Kail is nearby."

"Whatever's down here's killing them already," said Bardie, shifting his weight against the man supporting him. "We should wait to see if any survive."

"If they do, we may never find them again in these tunnels," said Aazen. "We could wandei down here until we starve, or until whatever made that noise finds us. Kail-or one of his group-had to have come through the main portal. To find the way out, we go to him."

Bardie laughed, drawing uneasy glances from the men standing near him, but the apprentice's eyes wete wide, delirious with pain and blood loss. "You're a fool, Korttun. You want to find your friend. Balram knew you wouldn't be able to kill him." 1:

Aazeri stopped, his expression frozen. Slowly, he tutned and walked back to the man. He lifted his sagging head by the hair. "What an interesting observation. Please enlighten me. What is my father planning?"

Bardie coughed and tried to shake his head, but Aazen heid him firmly.

"Very well." Aazen removed his hand and pressed his knuckles into one of Bardie's open wounds. The apprentice howled and thrashed, but Aazen pressed him back with his other forearm. "What is his plan?"

"Another party," Bardie choked out. "I overheard my… master speaking of it. He was communicating with Daen magically. If you betrayed us, he was to send word to the other party."

"Thank you." Aazen removed his hand, wiping his bloody fingers on Bardie's robes. The apprentice collapsed against the tunnel wall, sliding down to the floor.

Aazen's thoughts raced, but his eyes stayed on the men surrounding him. They kept theit faces averted, their expressions schooled to reveal nothing of their thoughts. And why should they? They were well trained and knew that Aazen, traitot of not, was the best hope they had of getting out of the caverns

alive. But how many of them had known? How many of his "family" plotted against him?

"We go on," he said at last. When one of the men moved to lift Bardie from the floor, Aazen shook his head. "Leave him. He'll slow us down. Scout ahead, but do not be seen. We follow Kail's party." he paused, looking at each of them, making them meet his eyes. "Unless anyone else has objections they'd like to voice?"

They had none. The scout started to move away down the tunnel. He turned a corner, and Aazen saw him stop and take a jerky step to the side, as if he'd lost his footing. The man behind him moved forward to steady him. "Wait!" shouted Aazen.

The scout fell sideways. A triple line of gashes ran vertically from his chest to his bowels. The ribs and organs in between were mauled. The scout had died before he knew what killed him. The man behind him cried out as he was yanked forward, around the corner into the darkness. This time Aazen heard the swish of claws passing through air and smelled the unnatural fire reek.

Grabbing the man nearest him, Aazen dived into one of the narrower tunnels off the main route, one they'd decided not to take for fear it would dead-end or become impassable. He heard the screams of his men, of Bardie trying to remember the words to a spell as the horror overcame him.

"Keep moving," Aazen snapped to the man he'd saved. He did not look back.

Cesira lay on the floor, her vision encompassing all of an inch-tall gap between the storeroom door and the ground. Her forked tongue passed over her fangs, touching wood and tasting dust. At last, she saw the shadows of feet approaching. The lock rattled, and' the footsteps retreated. Scant breaths later, a loud crack echoed in the dark space as a foot connected with the door, busting the old lock and splintering the doorframe.

A man poked his blade in among the stacks of linens, searching for a place a human woman might hide. He failed to notice the snake lying parallel to the threshold.

Cesira struck once, and then again, sinking her fangs into the flesh behind his knee. The man cried out, falling forward into the closet.

The black snake slithered away as the man's legs, sticking out into the dimly lit hall, began to twitch from the poison.

"Meisha once told me Varan believed the Delve to be an outpost of Deep Shanatar," said Kail. He looked out over the vast expanse of cavern. "I suppose this confirms it."

But the dwarf shook his head. "This is Deep Shanatar, lad." '

Kali lifted an eyebrow. "I don't believe yout memory for maps has failed you," he said. "So I don't have to remind you that we are not where Deep Shanatat should be."

"Who says so?" atgued Garavin. "I'm telling ye-and having studied far longer than ye've been alive, I should know-we're in Shanatar, and I'm guessing a part of it that's never been known. An outpost, maybe, but a grander one I've never seen."

"Kept a secret, even from Iltkazar?" Kail asked, naming heretofore the only known surviving kingdom of Deep Shanatar. Garavin had told him stories of the place long ago. "Why does one build a secret outpost?" he asked. "Unless they're doing something other folk might not approve of?"

Garavin looked at him. "Yer point?"

"You dig strongholds for people who have secrets or who want to protect knowledge. Is it possible the dwarves did the same hete, with magic? Did the Howlings, and by extension, Varan, stumble upon that work?"

"If they did, it was all tainted by the Howlings' greed when they turned to Abbathoi." Garavin said, shaking his head sadly.

"Why are Abbathor and Dumathoin fighting over such a small group of souls?" Kail asked.

"Because the Howlings are fighting," Gatavin replied. "These gods of the Morndin Samman, our pantheon, are forever locked in snuggle. The Howlings are olorns, stories that become symbols. Whichevet side wins in this will gain mote than souls."

"They gain a victory in lore," said Kali, understanding. "Yout stories will reflect the

tedemption of the Howlings from their greed. Dumathoin's powet grows."

"And his children would rejoice," said Garavin.

"Are the Howlings powerless in this? If they seek redemption, why do they not renounce Abbathor and ask Dumathoin's forgiveness?"

"Because they made a pact with the god of greed and accepted his blessings and aid. That gives Abbathor power over the Howlings that isn't easy to forsake. Dumathoin can only intervene so far as to hold them between life and death. For the rest, they must atone."

"But Meisha's master disrupted that process," said Kail. "So her message-the dwarPs warning-was also a cry for help."

"Issued to one who might carry and keep a dangerous secret," Garavin affirmed, "and risk everything for the sake of a friend. Meisha was wise to seek ye out."

Kail did not voice his doubts on that score. "And do you think it's a coincidence that I count among my friends a devout servant of Dumathoin?" he asked instead.

Garavin smiled. "Little in this world is a coincidence, lad." He nodded up and down the abyss. "Which door?"

"I don't think it matters," said Kali, "but whichever we choose, we can't lose track of these doors." He

looked back at the open portal. "That's our way back to the surface."

"The Shadow Thieves are sure to block it," Garavin pointed out. "If they haven't already. Might be we'll have to find a different exit."

Kali didn't need to tell the dwarf how monumental a task that would be. Their odds of surviving long enough to collect the others and find the way out seemed slim indeed at the moment.

"We could call out," he said finally, "from the bridge. The echo will carry down at least a dozen of these tunnels. If they're nearby, one of them might hear us."

"As could any number of beasties foraging in the tunnels," Garavin said.

Kail nodded. "Better to encounter them in the open than a bottleneck in a tunnel, where traps may be waiting to spring."

"Agreed," said the dwarf. He drew his maul out and cradled it in both hands.

Kali strode to the center of the bridge. His bootsteps echoed in the vast chamber.

Thousands of feet must have trodden these bridges, Kail reflected, a testament to the forgotten legacy of the dwarves, and far grander than all the merchants of Amn above. The enoimity of such a lost existence humbled Kali.

He raised a hand to the side of his mouth. "Meisha!" he shouted. The Harper's name carried far down the cavetn in either direction. "Laerin! Morgan!"

He shouted until his lungs ached. Nothing stirred in the vastness.

Kali turned back to Garavin, seeking a new suggestion, when Borl began to bark furiously. The dog pushed his head between the stone slats of the bridge.

Kali looked down. Thirty feet below, Talal ran from a tunnel in the opposite wall onto a btidge, so fast and stumbling so much that he nearly toppled ovet the edge. Sheer luck kept him upright as he plowed across.

"Morgan!" Kail yelled as the tall man came out behind Talal. "Up here!"

Neither slowed. Morgan flung his head back and hollered, – "Stay there!" Spinning, he flung a dagger at the tunnel mouth. The throw broke his stride, and the normally graceful thief fell sprawling on the bridge.

Kali saw Morgan's dagger stick to the hilt, and his eyes traveled upward in horror to see the demon. The beast stalked onto the bridge, his four legs spread to block any possible tetreat. Blood ran from his mouth all the way to the stone. Crouching down, the demon leaped into the air, springing toward Morgan.

The Howlings' penance-Meisha's beast, with blood-soaked claws-and Kail's friend, lying helpless on the

bridge without Laerin to back him up.

"No! Gods of stone damn you!" Kail shouted. He vaulted over the rail and dropped, curling his body and praying he could hit the beast in mid-spring. If nothing else, he would take the demon over the side with him.

They collided in the air. Kali felt the heat, the blast of brimstone, before he even touched the demon's hide. He landed flat on the beast's back, surprising him and driving him aside of his intended target. The demon's claws raked for balance; his hindquarters fish tailed back and forth on the bridge, trying to shake Kail off.

Kali felt blood on his hands. They were covered with small wounds ripped open on the spines sprouting from the demon's back. And he burned. He felt slick blisters form on his palms and remembered the sickening smell of his campfire burns. If the nerves in his hands hadn't been dulled, he wouldn't have been able to withstand the pain.

The demon reared onto his hind legs. Kail slid off his back to the walkway. He no longer needed to worry about taking the attention off Morgan. The demon's smoldering, malevolent gaze was firmly fixed on Kali. The beast lunged at him, his claws poised to rake whatever exposed flesh they could find.

Kali had no space to maneuvet or dodge on the bridge. Without really considering it, he jumped over the rail and off the bridge, plunging straight down again. Reaching out, he caught the bridge's stone

ledge. The sudden, snapping weight jarred his shoulder, nearly wrenching it from its socket. Kail gritted his teeth and reached up with his other hand.

The demon hit the bridge where Kali had stood and turned, coming back for anothei attack.

In his peripheral vision Kail saw Morgan on his feet, climbing a rope Garavin had tied onto the upper walkway. The dwarf fired his crossbow at the demon. Dangling from the rope, Morgan threw another dagger.

The demon hardly seemed to feel the stings. The beast shook out his long, red mane and stalked Kail. Up close, Kali could see a fresh piercing wound had rent his abdomen, but the maimed socket where his eye had once been was an old wound.

Hatred emanated from the orb that still functioned. Kail felt it as a cteeping fear that worked its way up his spine, thteatening to patalyze him.

The beast was playing with him, ttying to shake him loose from his perch without an effort. Blood dripped from his fangs onto Kail's face. When Kail didn't move, the beast stepped back, and a veil of datkness descended around them.

Agony exploded in Kail's injured hands. Sickeningly, he realized the demon had sunk his jaws into the backs of them.

With a shout of pain, Kali let go, and found to his horror that his hands were impaled, tangled in the thing's mouth. Curling his legs, Kail kicked out against the bridge, away from the demon's face. The

demon's hot breath was a furnace of filth and rot. He pulled his hands free, and then he was falling.

He passed out of the globe of darkness in time to see a shower of magical bolts stteak above him, into the sphere. Kail prayed the magic came from Dantane, that the wizard would be able to save the others.

He looked beneath him, but all the bridges were out of teach. He plummeted past the last one and down into anothet, gteatet darkness. His vision failed as the light from above faded. His ears filled with tushing ait, then suddenly, nothing. His descent came to an abtupt halt.

Kali waited for his bones to shatter against the stone. His chin struck his chest, mashing his tongue between his teeth, but other than that small pain, he felt whole.

Groaning, Kali tolled to his stomach. A wave of vettigo swept ovet him as he realized he was stating into the bottomless chasm, suspended by some invisible stting. Pumping his legs, he felt the fly spell propel him upward.

Dantane, he thought, or Meisha. Could it be she survived? Trepidation warred with giddy telief that the Harper might still be alive.

Kail put his boot against the cavern wall and pushed off, hurling himself back to the battle.

When he emerged into the light, his suspicion was confirmed.

Meisha and Dantane stood on the bridge with Talal between them. Meisha saw Kail coming and motioned to the demon, which stalked cautiously down the walkway toward the group. The globe of darkness had gone, and Dantane continued to hurl spells, but the demon kept coming, measuring the wizard's strength.

Kail flew up from beneath, his sword leading. He slashed along the demon's flank and kept going, up out of his reach. On the bridge, the advantage was temporarily theirs. As long as they could stay put of the demon's reach and resist his aura, they could fight. If he managed to herd them back into the tunnels, they were mice in the snake hole.

A massive, clawed paw struck out at Kail's face. He flipped over backward and came from beneath with his blade out straight. He stabbed for the demon's chest, but he dodged away.

Kail pulled out of the roll and floundered, losing precious time as he righted himself. His grasp of the flight spell was tenuous at best. He took a claw to his shoulder for his mistake, a wound that burned down the length of his arm.

Kail circled under the bridge and came up in a burst of speed, hoping for surprise, but the demon was gone. Weary of the wizard pricking at him, the beast chose to charge down the bridge to the spellcasters and Talal.

Dantane threw out a hand as though to ward off an attack. In response, a wall of thick stone sprouted from the bridge, growing like a blunt spike to

intercept the demon's charge. The demon slammed into the wall, shaking the entire bridge,, but the spell held firm.

"The rope!" Kali yelled up to Garavin. He grabbed the dangling end and flew over the wall. The demon continued to pound and claw against the barrier. He would wear it down quickly, Kail knew.

He floated down, putting the rope in Talal's hands as Garavin retied it from above. Meisha flew beside him, helping the boy scramble to the relative safety of the upper bridge.

"He's breaking through," said Dantane. The wizard weaved on his feet, drained by the force of all the released Art.

"You have to keep him on the bridge," said a new voice.

Kali reacted instantly. He swung his sword with all his strength.

Aazen's blade caught it. Steel sang loudly in the cavern.

Kali cursed. Now they were pinned from both sides.

Aazen lowered his weapon, motioning the man behind him to stay back. "I'm not going to kill you at the moment, Kail," he said.

"A pleasant fact to know," Kali remarked, keeping his sword raised.

"At least not until the demon is dead. Get to the othet bridge," Aazen said, addressing his man.

"No. Over there." Kali pointed to the closest walkway below, well out of range of his friends above.

Aazen nodded, and the thief tossed a grappling hook out over the chasm. Aazen remained with Kail and Dantane.

"I will guard the wizaid," he offered.

This elicited a sardonic laugh from Kali. "How generous of you."

Aazen waved a hand impatiently. "We have no time to argue. Fly and work that sword while you have the opportunity."

"He's right," said Dantane unexpectedly. "Go."

Kali shook his head. "Don't trust him."

"I do not," Dantane snapped. "I'm not as blind as you. But he has it aright. Go, while you can."

Kail's gaze remained on Aazen, silently promising what would happen if he bettayed them. He stepped off the walkway, allowing himself to float in the air. He turned, flying toward the disintegrating wall.

He landed on the top in a skid. Using the spell to aid his balance, Kail slid down the opposite side. He brought his sword down vertically just as the demon came at the wall again. This time the demon couldn't dodge, and his blade sheared into the beast's ribs.

Kail twisted aside, expecting an immediate retaliation, but the demon fell back, surprised, favoring his side.

Kail pressed, stabbing him in the haunch, anywhere he could reach, using his sword as leverage to propel himself back into flight.

Recovering, the demon followed and struck out, snagging Kail's leg with a massive claw. The demon dragged him back down to the ground. Kail felt the claws penetrate his boots, burning, adding to his other wounds.

Not enough, Kali thought as he felt himself tolled onto his stomach, his atms trapped beneath his body. He would run out of fight-they all would-long before the demon was finished.

"Keeper of knowledge-sever the link."

Garavin turned from the battle at the sound of the voice, compelled by a force impossible to resist.

The ghost of one of the long-dead Howlings stood before him, spilling silver light from the sockets of his vacant eyes. Garavin looked involuntarily at the light, and the symbol at his throat began to burn. He heard the voices of the others, screaming at Kail, screaming for Garavin to help him, but the dwarf stood frozen. Couldn't they see him? Even Borl wasn't reacting. How could they not see?

"Dumathoin," Garavin spoke, in a voice rigid with awe. He slid to his knees. "Lord Under Mountain, we cannot defeat the demon. Aid us, please."

The god's essence spoke through the ghost. "Secret keeper, call to him." The avatar reached out to touch his forehead. "Show him."

Tears spilled from Garavin's eyes, hissing as they touched Dumathoin's holy symbol. He felt the power grow inside him, and he knew what form it would have to take. "1 understand, Lord Under Mountain. I obey."

Kail felt Dantane's energy spells reverberate through the demon's claw, knocking the beast off balance. Whether it had any effect other than to incense the creature, Kail didn't know, but he used the distraction to crawl out from under the demon's bloody paw and free his sword. Gripping the blade, he realized the vibration wasn't coming from the demon.

The magic came from his sword.

No more than a tremor at first, the sensation grew, until Kail had to hold the weapon with both hands. The empty space whete the Motel emetald had been was filled with a silver light that outlined the blade. Accompanying the light, the vibrat-ing hum sounded like music. Then he heatd, within the song, Garavin's voice.

"Banish the demon, Kail."

The dwarf s voice pierced his temples. Kail shook his head to clear it and to deny him. "You have to get out of here, back through the portal. If we stay, he'll slaughter us all," he said.

"Listen to me, lad." Garavin's voice shook him, unrelenting. "Ye can wound the thing a thousand times, but his link to this world has to be severed. He's holding onto it desperately. As long as he's sure it's safe, he can kill us all at his leisure. By Dumathoin's will, Kali."

"Kali!" This time it was Meisha, shouting to him from the bridge. "The eye, Kail! The empty eye!" the Harper cried.

Kali swung his sword around. It seemed to have grown heavier with the weight of Gatavin's voice coursing through the blade. He flew into the demon's path, angling to its left. The jarilith didn't need eyes to find him, but the beast turned anyway, running alongside Kali, using the points of his spines as defensive weapons.

Kali pulled back, sucking in his gut. He didn't ttust his armor to hold, and wasn't surprised when he heard cloth and chain tip. His cloak, caught against his flank, tore into two ragged slits.

My hands are already ruined, Kali thought, so… Reaching out, Kail grabbed a handful of red and black mane and pulled, hoping to wrench the beast's head around.

He might as well have tried to turn a statue's head.

The demon jumped straighr up, pulling Kail with him. His gtip shaken, Kali fell onto his back on the walkway. He managed to hold onto his sword, but the weapon still vibrated painfully in his hands. Its guard wedged against the stone bridge, allowing him to see the silver light clearly. Movement reflected

within it like a mirror, showing the demon as he turned and jumped again, intending to finish his prey while he was out of the air.

Bringing his arms and legs in close to his body, Kali swung the humming blade around until the demon filled the reflective sutface, and all he could feel was heat, a great waterfall of it coming down on him. The blade's edge crossed his center of vision then thrust back, deep into the demon's empty socket.

His sword ripped out of his grasp, and the last thing Kail heard before the fire buried him was the demon's roar, a scream that sounded almost human.

Varan screamed, clawing at the punctured eyeball. He tore it out of its socket and cast it aside. The Shadow Thief guarding him skittered back a step in revulsion.

Crying, the wizard flopped onto his back. His breath hissed erratically in and out of his lungs. Blood that was not his own ran from his ruined eye socket. After a moment, he raised his hands to wipe the moisture away-blood from one eye, tears from the other. He began to laugh, a relieved, hysterical sound that echoed through the caves and brought the other thieves running.

"What happened?" asked Geroll.

"Don't know," said the guard, taking another step back just to be safe. "He just started screaming, then pulled out his own eye. Crazy bastard looks almost happy about it."

CHAPTER 28

The Howling Delve 5 Marpenoth, the

Year of Lightning Storms (1374DR)

Kali felt the weight of the demon come down and knew the battle was over. He prayed the spines would impale him and end his life quickly. If they did not-panic rose sickeningly in his throat-he would burn to death from the demon's flesh.

A silvei light filled the cavern, blinding him, but the killing weight did not follow. Kali blinked the brightness out of his eyes and strained to see. Running feet came across the bridge toward him. Dantane's wall had come down. The wizard and Aazen were coming to him, but neither wore looks of fear or alarm. If anything, their expressions were confused.

Kail rolled onto his side, still shocked at his ability to do so. A few feet away, his sword lay on the walkway.

The jarilith was gone. There was only a small puddle of blood left on the bridge. Either the demon had fallen from the bridge, or Kail had truly severed his link to this place.

"He's gone," said Dantane, echoing Kail's thoughts. He knelt beside Kali to examine his wounds. "You need healing, or you're going to die," he said.

Kail laughed. Pain flared in his abdomen. "No need to spare my delicate feelings. Tell me the truth."

"Kail! Dantane!" cried Meisha from above them. "It's Garavin!"

Garavin-his voice had cut off sometime during the flash of silver light. Kali used Dantane's arm to haul himself to his feet. Light-headed from wounds and the terror gripping his heart, he flew unsteadily to the upper bridge. Dantane flew beside him.

Out of the corner of his vision, Kail saw Aazen looking past them, up to the double doors Kail and Garavin had come through. Green portal light spilled out through the doorway. Aazen motioned to his man on the opposite bridge.

Let them go, Kail thought. Dantane was right. He wasn't in any condition to fight.

He crested the stone lip, and all thoughts of Aazen deserted him.

Garavin lay prone on the bridge. Meisha and Talal crouched beside him. The dwarf clutched his holy symbol in his hand, his eyes fixed and staring at nothing.

Kail bent, trying to pry the symbol loose, but stopped when he felt the latent heat. "What happened?" he demanded.

"It was the ghost," said Talal. "The one from the room, where we found Braedrin's body. Meisha's messenger. I saw it touch him. I don't think he's breathin' at all."

"Garavin," Kail said, taking his friend by the shoulders. There were no visible wounds on the

dwarPs body. "Wake up. Wherever you are, we need you back here." He held his maimed hands in front of the dwarPs vacant eyes. "Look at this. See what a wreck I make of myself when you're not hete?" His voice cracked. "By the gods, you'd better not be dead." He leaned close and spoke in the dwarPs ear. "There are too many ghosts down hete already, old friend. Please."

Kali thought he heard a shallow push of air fill his friend's chest. Garavin's bloodshot eyes slid closed, then opened again, and something of a presence returned. Kali breathed a quiet prayer of thanks. "Can you heat me, old friend?" he asked.

"He's gone," said the dwarf, looking beyond Kail to something unseen. His voice held a sadness Kail had never heard before.

"Who's gone?" Kali asked quietly.

"Dumathoin," replied the dwarf. Beside him, Meisha drew a startled breath, but Garavin's attention was on Kail. "He's gone, and so are the Howlings. Their penance is done."

"Is it safe to go now?"

Garavin nodded. "Best to leave it all to the dust, lad." This time he did look at Meisha. "And take the warning to other secret keepers. This Shanatar doesn't exist."

The Hatper nodded, and Kali stood up. Garavin touched his hands and stomach and began a healing prayer.

"As soon as we can move, we're getting out of here," Kali said, feeling the pain of his wounds diminish. When Garavin would have tended other hurts, he gently pushed the dwatf away. "I'm all right, old friend. Save your strength."

"To what fate are we escaping?" spoke up Dantane. When Kali turned, he pointed to the double doors. "Your friend is gone through the portal."

"Could be an ambush waiting for us up top," said Morgan. He sounded as if he did not care either way.

"Or the portal malfunctioned again, and they could be sitting anywhere in the Delve," said Kail. He thought of Cesita, back at the estate. "We don't have any other way out."

While the others gathered themselves, Kali went to Morgan,. but the thief remained subdued. He would not meet Kail's eyes.

Kali tried to speak, to confirm what he hadn't been able to acknowledge when Morgan had run onto the bridge without Laerin, when he'd seen the fresh blood on the demon's claws.

"Is there..." Kali cleared his throat and tried again. "Is there a body?" Morgan paled, but it was Talal who answered.

"There's nothing you'd recognize," he said, shuddering at a memory he could never be rid of. "Your friend's gone."

Kali nodded, but inwardly, the rage was so profound he thought he might burn from it. Was this what it

was like for Meisha, he wondered, to be filled with fire and anger so consuming it swallowed his thoughts? To think that his friend, who loved the light, the road, the open air-that this should be his tomb… "Kail."

Kail blinked. For a breath, he'd thought it was Cesira's voice-impatient, always commanding, but with an underlying softness she tried to hide. He looked up, but it was Meisha who addressed him.

"There might be another way out," the Harper said. "The Climb. It should lead all the way to the portal room."

Kail met her eyes and saw the reluctance there. "What aren't you telling me?"

"We might all die in the attempt."

"Of course." Kail looked around the group and received answering nods of assent. They were with him. "Let's go," he said. Cesira's face was still bright in his mind.

I'm coming.

Marguin slid around the corner, using a mirror the size of her thumb to see that the way was clear. Elsis came behind her with an arrow nestled in the cutve of a fully drawn bow.

"We know you're here, Lady," Elsis sang out mockingly. He tipped a silver candelabra off a side table onto the floor. Flames licked at the expensive woven rugs, sending up charred fumes. "The longer

you hide, the more painful it will be when we catch you."

Movement from one of the doorways caught his eye. Elsis trained his bow on the spot, but it was only Marguin's reflection in a mirror on the opposite wall.

The house was too damn quiet. There were so many rooms that connected to other rooms without spilling back into the main hallways. The bitch could be leading them around the house, and they'd never know it.

Catch this, breathed a voice at his ear.

Elsis swept the bow in an arc and released. The arrow did not have far to travel. Less than two feet away, it splintered through Marguin's armor near the base of her spine. The woman made a small, pitiful cry and dropped in front of him. Elsis fumbled another arrow from his quiver and nocked it, but he did not hear the voice again. He was alone in the hallway with Marguin's body curled at his feet.

Cesira watched the man with the bow scout the hallway. She didn't have enough spells to run him out of arrows, but she was more than willing to disquiet his search. Murmuring a word, she cast the ghostly whisper again. This time, his arrow shattered a mirror.

Crouching low, Cesira crept back to the servants' stair. Two down-more if any from the downstairs trap were still incapacitated. Still too many, she thought, plenty enough to box her in, and there was no sign of Balram. He must still be in the main hall. He

wasn't going to make it easy by coming for her himself. Going to him would be beyond foolish.

Cesira tried to recall how many weapons and traps remained. Not enough to take out all of them at once, but if she could get a clear path to the garden- yes, it might work. Or she might die carrying out her plan.

"You were right," she said, holding Kail's emerald to her breast. "I'm an arrogant, stubborn fool." She'd underestimated Balram and the Shadow Thieves, and now she was hopelessly outnumbered. "Time to even the odds."

Aazen came through the portal, appearing on the rocky rim of the cavern floor before a circle of drawn weapons. The thieves saw Tarthet's body clutched in Aazen's arms but did not lower their steel. If anything, suspicion grew in their eyes.

"Where is Morel?" The man who addressed him was Geroll, one of Daen's men.

"Food for a demon, when I left him," Aazen lied. He settled the dead man on the floor and drew Morgan's dagger from his back. He'd picked it up on the bridge just before they'd entered the portal room. Tarthet might have corroborated his story. Aazen would never know. "Does the wizard live?" he asked.

"If you can call it that." Getoll nudged the unconscious Vatan with his leg. The wizard did not stir. "He's been like that ever since he lost his eye."

"His eye?" Aazen echoed, then he saw Varan's empty socket. So that was the link. "Perhaps it's

best. Now we can safely remove him from the Delve."

Getoll nodded carefully. "Call the others back," he said to the man nearest him. "We have what we came for." He looked at Aazen, clearly reluctant to telinquish the authority he'd thought would be assured by Aazen's treachery. But he had no proof, and to accuse Balram's son without it would mean his death. "Balram will be expecting your report," he said finally.

"Of coutse." Before Aazen could issue an order, the portal in the shaft above his head flared green, and Tershus dropped through, wounded but alive. The halfling saw Aazen and ran right up to him, ignoring Daen's men completely.

"You'd better come," he said breathlessly. "It's your father."

Aazen stiffened. "What about my father?"

"He took a group of men to Morel house. They haven't returned, and there've been reports of fire in that section of the city."

Aazen grabbed Tershus by the arm, digging in until the small man yelped. "Bring the wizard," he said.

"What about the portals?" demanded Geroll. "We can't leave them open."

"My men and I were separated," said Aazen. "If you wish to eliminate any hope of them returning alive, by all means, close the gates. I'll be happy to explain your decision, and the manpower lost, to Daen."

He didn't wait for the man to formulate a reply. He shook the halfling in his grip. "Bring the wizard," he repeated. "Now."

Tershus pulled away, his eyes wide at the alteration in Aazen's demeanor. But for Aazen, the feelings that coursed through him were familiar, shameful, and completely unsurprising to him.

His father was in danger. His father-who'd sent these Shadow Thieves to kill him-needed his son. And Aazen ran to answer that need, as he had always done, as he would always do, for as long as Balram was alive.

Cesira knelt on the floor by the stairway, preparing to change form, when the bolt sttuck her. Her leg gave out, and she sprawled. Twisting, she ptessed her back to the meager protection of the pillar at the landing.

Below her, Balram lowered his crossbow, a weapon he hadn't been carrying when he'd entered the house. "You are far more fetching in that shape than any other, my dear," he called up to her. "And you are not the only person outside the Morel family who knows where the master of the house kept his toys. Come down, and perhaps I'll show you a few Kail doesn't know about."

A generous offer, my lord, Cesira replied. She bit her lip against the pain in het leg. But I'm afraid I must decline. Shadows stitred in the upper hallway, and Cesira heard footsteps coming, running toward their voices.

She risked a glance down to the hall. She couldn't see Balram, but there was, as she'd hoped, an unobstructed path to the garden. The question remained, how many crossbow bolts would she take getting there?

Elsis's shout from the hallway decided her. She could not outrun arrows and bolts.

Elsis came around the corner, his eyes widening in surprise when he saw her just sitting, exposed, at the top of the stairs. Cesira grabbed a knife from her belt and threw it, forcing him to duck back around the corner.

Standing unsteadily, she found her balance and flipped forward over the stair rail, hanging from her fingers. She swung out feet first and let go, landing in a painful crouch on the first floor. Her eyes tracked the toom for Balram-corner pillar; thete you are.

She jumped before she heard the twang of the crossbow. Her feet left the floor at the same time her hands came down. She pushed off, into a forward roll, and the bolt struck wood somewhere above her head. Free in that breath, she sprang up and ran, ran as she used to run with the mist stags in the deepest parts of Mir. Her leg was on fire, but she ignored the pain.

She hit the doors to the garden, flung them open, and the third bolt slammed into het back, driving her forward. She felt the tip scrape a rib and resisted the urge to scream. She would not give Balram, a

man who reveled in pain, the satisfaction of seeing hers.

Cesira stumbled into the garden, breathing night air and taking in her first-and possibly last-glimpse of the cloudy sky since her vigil on the tower. She ran through the garden's heart, calling silently as she went. In her mind, she screamed theit names with her true voice, a voice only the wild beasts could hear.

Sparks flew as an arrow skittered off the stone fountain. Distracted, Cesira tripped and fell to the walkway, striking her head against the ground. To the side, she saw Elsis and another man with a lantern step into the garden alongside Balram.

"So many memories from Esmeltaran," Balram remarked idly. He reloaded his weapon as he approached. "An empty garden, a dty fountain, and finally an end to the Morel family."

He stepped onto the walkway. "What form would you care to die in, my lady?" he inquired politely. He raised the crossbow. "The woman... the beast?" His lips curved. "Or are they all the same?"

All, my lord, the druid gasped as a rush of wind filled the garden. We are all bitches with sharp claws.

Balram felt the wind and looked up in time to see the birds-Morel's hunting raptors-descend on the garden. Balram snapped his crossbow up, aiming for Cesira's heart, but the flock absorbed the bolt. The night filled with wings, talons, and the high, shrill cries of incensed animals.

Balram took a step forward, but the swarm only increased the closer he got to the dtuid. A sharp pain burst from his ear, ripping up into his head. He touched the side of his face and found the earlobe gone. Blood dripped down his neck.

"Back inside!" Elsis cried. "Get back!"

"No, damn you!" Balram grabbed the lantern from the other man's hand. He waved it in the air, batting aside the large bodies. The lantern broke, sending birds up into the sky aflame. Balram threw up his other arm to protect his eyes, but he felt scratches and bites all over his body.

Through the violence, he saw Cesira-once helpless at his feet-now with her eyes changing shape and color. Her arms joined the mass of wings, and for a bizarre breath she was a hybrid of woman and bird. Balram swung the lantern again, charging forward, but she was already gone, transformed and carried away by the flock.

Meisha had never seen the bottom end of the Climb, but her research since she'd left the Delve told her it should be there. Still, it took her a while to find it. She'd only traversed a por^ tion of it in her search for Shaera-a search that had ended in tragedy. Now she had to lead an entire group to safety through the treacherous passage to the surface-if it still led all the way to the surface. Damn the Howlings anyway.

Kail stood at the base of a tunnel that slanted upward until it was almost vertical. Stone platforms jutted from the walls to form uneven rungs.

"I'll lead," Kail said. "Meisha and Talal come behind me, then Dantane and Garavin. Morgan, take Botl and bring up the rear."

"Slow going," Dantane commented, "with a dog and an injured dwarf."

"Then we go as slowly as necessary," Kail said. He pulled himself up onto the first stone ledge.

Meisha floated globes of shimmering fire ahead and behind them, so they would be unencumbered by torches. She could see nothing of Kail beyond his boots and the tail of his cloak, but she could sense the urgency in his movements.

"What will you do once we reach the surface?" Meisha asked. "Aazen and the Shadow Thieves will be long gone."

"Cesira," Kail said, hauling himself up another rung. "They'll be going for the house. I have to be there."

"And Varan?" Meisha asked.

"The Shadow Thieves will have him," Kali said. "They won't give him up easily."

Neither will I, Meisha thought.

Below them, Garavin succumbed to a fit of coughing that echoed through the shaft. Kali stopped the group.

"How are you doing, old friend," he called down.

Motgan answered him. "He's spitting some blood, Kail. That silver light messed him up bad."

"Hang on just a little longer," Kali said. "We're almost out of this shaft." He closed his eyes and murmured a prayer to Dumathoin.

Don t forsake your servant now.

Kail looked up. He could see an obstacle ahead. He motioned for Meisha to send a fire globe up so he could see.

"Son of a god's cursed whore," he hissed under his breath.

Stating him in the face was a rusty shield floating in a cloud of viscous fluid. The fire globe drifted higher. Kail could make out the edges of a gelatinous cube suctioned to the walls of the shaft.

"Is it alive?" Meisha asked. She touched the oozing substance dribbling down the walls.

"Alive or dead, it can still suffocate us, depending on how far up the shaft it teaches," Dantane said.

Kail leaned closer to the cube. The slime distorted the objects within-relics of the creature's last victims-but he could make out enough of the stone handholds inside the cube to pull himself through.

"Morgan, I need your rope," he called down.

Morgan unhooked an end of silk cord from his belt and tossed it up to Kali. Tying one end-of the rope around his waist, Kali handed the other to Meisha.

"When I pull the cord in three quick jerks, it means I've reached the other side," he said. "The next person uses the rope to climb up. We pull Garavin and Borl up last." He looked at Talal. "Big breath," he told the boy.

Talal muttered, "Already drowned once today, why not twice?"

"Hold it in tight," said Kali, "You don't want a lungful of what's up there. You won't come back from it."

Secured by the rope, Kali positioned himself in a crouch on the stone ledge and thrust up from the knees, into the gelatinous cube.

Sound and light instantly disappeared. Kail tried to lift his arms, but it was as if someone had attached sandbags to his muscles. His muscles burning and stretching with the effort, he gripped the next rung and climbed.

His face brushed something hard that felt vaguely like fingers-a lost gauntlet, perhaps, all that was left of one of the cube's victims. Kail would have shuddered, if his muscles could have responded to the impulse.

His lungs burned. The rough stone grated against his injured hands. They would be raw and bleeding again soon. With a desperate shove, he broke through the slimy surface and hit his chest against a stone platform.

Coughing and spitting slime, Kali hauled his lower body out of the cube and onto the stone platfoim. He lay on his back gasping for a moment. His entire

body was saturared with slime, but at least he could breathe air again.

Kail wiped his eyes clear and saw darkness, illuminated faintly by Meisha's fire globes drifting below. The light filtering through the cube cast eerie green glows on the walls.

Gathering the rope about his waist, Kail pulled until it came taut three times. He hoped Meisha's slighter weight would make the climb easier.

A tense moment latet, a cap of black hait broke the sutface, and Meisha crawled up beside him onto the stone ledge.

"What a wonderful experience," the Harper said, flicking the substance off her fingers. Slime plastered her hair to her forehead, and her eyelashes stuck together in dark clumps.

The othets followed slowly, until only Garavin and Borl remained. It took the combined strength of Kail, Morgan, and Dantane to haul the pair through the cube, Borl with his muzzle and nose tied shut with cloth. By the time the dwarf was clear of the creature, he barely breathed. Kali quickly unfastened the cloth that kept the dog from breathing in the slime, then turned to Garavin.

"Help me clean him off," Kali ordered. "The slime will corrode his skin if it's left alone."

They laid the gasping dwarf down onto the stone platform. Garavin dredged up a grin for Morgan as the thief tried to wipe away the slime.

"Laerin would be chuckling if he could see ye playing nursemaid," the dwarf said.

Morgan offered one of his halfhearted gtunts. "Don't get used to it," he said.

"All right, finish up," Kail said. "We have to keep moving." He pointed to a tunnel angling away from the shaft. "Level ground, Garavin," he said. "Easy going."

"If it lasts." Dantane said, always the voice of dissension. He nodded to the dwarf. "He won't make another climb like this."

"I'll be looking after myself just fine, young one," said Gatavin sharply. He got to his feet unaided, but leaned heavily against the tunnel wall.

Kali exchanged a glance with Morgan. Garavin never lost patience with anyone. For the taciturn dwatf to do so now frightened Kail more than a little.

"We'll rest here," Kali said. "Dantane's right. We don't know how long any of us will last if we encounter another long climb."

The others moved away to give the dwarf some room. Kail guided his friend back to a sitting position and settled beside him.

Garavin leaned heavily on him for support. When he looked at Kail, his pupils had dilated to two piercing black holes surrounded by a mound of wrinkles. He seemed to have aged a decade in the space of a moment.

"What happened, Garavin?" Kali asked, keeping his voice low. "Was it really Dumathoin on the bridge?"

The dwarf closed his eyes and breathed. The rough wheeze was barely audible. "It was… a power I've never felt before, lad-or could ever hope to feel again."

"Did the power consume you from the inside?" Kail asked urgently. "Can you recover?"

"I think so," said Garavin. "To live on-feels like Dumathoin's plan for me." He looked at Kail. "But we-none of us, have the guarantee of living through this passage."

"Don't worry, I'll see to that," said Kali.

Across the tunnel, Meisha listened with half an ear to their conversation, and used her remaining attention to direct the light globes down the tunnel to scout ahead.

"Stay back here, Talal," she called out to the boy, who'd wandered halfheartedly to follow the globes. She heard the scrape of feet on stone and Talal's voice, echoing back to them.

"The tunnel slants down!" he called out. "Spikes on the walls, but the bottom's clear."

Through her exhaustion, the words came to Meisha sluggishly. Spikes on the walls.

Memories of her own trek through the caverns came rushing back from a buried place in her mind.

With an incoherent shout of warning, Meisha came to her feet. She ran in the direction Talal had wandered, knowing even as she skidded down the slant that she would be too late.

The boy's foot touched a pressure plate identical to the one Shaera had encountered on her ill-fated journey farther up rhe

Climb. Meisha heard Morgan shout as the thief recognized the danget, but het eyes wete only on Talal.

She pushed off, using the slanted stone fot leverage, hurling herself into the boy. They crashed together to the floor as rocks rained down on them.

"Meisha!" Kail shouted, but his voice was lost in the hail of battering stones.

Meisha heard Talal screaming in her ear. She felt the impact of the stones against her back, smashing ribs and bruising flesh.

"No," she whimpered, when Talal's screams abruptly cut off. She felt the boy go limp in her arms. In Meisha's mind, all she could see were Shaera's dead eyes, all she could hear was the prayer to an unknown god the girl had whispered in the dark. Talal had no one to watch ovet him. He was alone in the datk.

Shaeta's blood-covered visage... Varan's ruined eye... Laerin's blood on a demon's claws.

Something inside Meisha broke. Without thought or hope, she called the fire.

Flame blazed from her eyes, her mouth, from every wound torn open by the falling stones. Meisha's pain disappeared, replaced by raw burning-a heat that should have incinerated her body but did not. The fire did not even singe her clothes. Instead the flames shielded her, casting away the falling stones or burning them to smoking blisters before her eyes.

Meisha had never experienced this kind of telease. The power within her swelled, and for the first time in her life, she felt nothing could harm her. The fire consumed all, taking thought and emotion and turning the world black inside her mind. Safe in the flaming cocoon, she could exist as one with het element and never have to feel the pain of the world again.

Is that what you want?

Dantane's words echoed in her mind. "Yes, oh yes!" she screamed, crying tears of black flame. Let me stay this way, always.

"Meisha!"

She heard the voice near her ear, frightened but insistent, distracting her from her paradise. Meisha tried to ignore it. The fire beckoned her, seductive and soft, a lover's touch that banished all her memories. She did not even recognize the voice calling het.

"Meisha."

Hands gripped her shoulders, shaking her and sending waves of cold through the inferno. Meisha shuddered at the icy touch.

"Go away," she snarled, hearing the flames in her own voice. "Leave me be!"

The hands shrank back, and for a moment Meisha thought they would rerreat. Then she felt the slap across her cheek, sharp and brutal. The hands shook her again, harder.

Meisha reared back, prepared to burn her attacker to cinders, when she heard the choked cry of pain. The voice spoke her name again, this time in anger.

"Meisha-stupid, flame-kissing Harper-have done!"

Meisha opened her eyes. The flames drained out of her body, leaving her weak and quivering. She collapsed on top of Talal, who squeaked in fresh agony.

"How many ways are you trying to kill me!" the boy screeched, pushing her off and scrambling away.

"You're alive," Meisha said wonderingly. "The cave-in... 1 thought it had killed you. It killed her-Shaera."

"Is she all right?" came Kail's voice from somewhere above her head.

"Babbling something, but I always knew her mind was addled," Talal said. The boy snorted, but his eyes were filled with concern when he looked down at her.

"How?" Meisha asked.

"Your fat bulk shielded me from the worst of it," the boy said, grinning. "Got a nasty bump, though." He

touched his head and winced. "Your back's going to have some pretty scars on ir."

He reached under her arms and felt for broken bones as Kail and the others approached.

Meisha caught Talal's wrist and saw the blistering burns on his palm. Her eyes filled with misery. "I burned you," she said bleakly. "I could have killed you."

"You could have killed us all," said Kail, as Garavin knelt beside her and muttered a prayer. "But you didn't."

Meisha looked at Dantane. She felt the dwatf s healing wash over her, closing the worst of her injuries. Talal was right, she thought. Some of the scars would never heal.

"I felt the powet," she told the wizatd. "The element. I was fire. I wanted it so badly."

Dantane nodded, understanding, but Talal scoffed. "Showing off was what she did," he said. "Boom! That's all you sorcerers are about."

Meisha touched the boy's wrist. "Thank you for telling me when to stop," she whispeted. This time, moisture ttailed down het cheeks tathet than fire.

Talal's face scrunched up at the sight of the teats. He looked mote panicked than he had when she was on fire. "Get me out of here, Lady, and we're even. Sune's teats, I sweat this is the last time I'll ask."

"Can you continue?" Kail asked her.

With Talal's aid, Meisha got to het feet. "I can," she said.

He nodded. "Let's go, then. Thete's still a long climb, and the Shadow Thieves are waiting."

CHAPTER 29

Keczulla, Amn 5 Marpenoth, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

When Kail emerged from the Bladesmile estate and saw the black cloud hanging in the sky above the Gold Ward, he didn't realize it was alive. He'd been on guatd for a Shadow Thief ambush, but the portal room, both in the Delve and the estate, was deserted, the gates active and waiting. He'd been certain it was a trap, but there was no sign of the Shadow Thieves or Varan.

When the black cloud shattered, the birds scattered throughout the city, some dropping from the sky impaled with arrows, others on fire, reeling wildly in the air like dying phoenixes. Kali knew at once where they'd come from.

"Take Garavin to Waukeen's temple," he told Morgan and Talal. The dwarf still walked in a haze, his strength depleted. Kali didn't know how long it would take for him to recover from his experience. "Meisha, Dantane. Come with me." He offered no other explanation; he simply ran toward his home.

He was almost to the line of dark hedgerows that led up to the main entrance when Meisha and Dantane caught up. With surprising strength, the Harper yanked him down behind the hedge while shadows moved in front of the burning house.

Kail grabbed her by the front of het jerkin, both in fury and to steady himself. "If you're not going to

help me," he snarled, "get out of my way!"

Meisha glared at him. "Clearly you've forgotten whom you're speaking to," she said, nodding to the house. "They have Varan. I will merrily tear your home apart to find him if it pleases you, but I would rather not die until Balram is writhing safely in the deepest Hells." She leaned close. "I have held myself in check; now you will do the same. Remember your promise, Kali."

They held each other's gaze, and then, jarringly, Kail's face split in a grin. "Fine-tear the place apart. But clear a path for me first. Remember the garden?"

The guards stationed at the double front doors were shocked when they saw Balram and his two companions re-enter the hall, bleeding from scores of scratches and bites. At the same time, light-bright as a bonfire blaze-filled the vertical windows aside the front doors.

"What was that?" asked Balram, one hand covering his bleeding ear.

Elsis ran to the window. "The fite must have spread faster than we anticipated," he said. "The hedgerows are ablaze." "What?"

The guard pointed to the twin lines of fire burning up to the carriageway.

"Bloody gods," Elsis murmured, flinging one of the doors open to get a bettet view. "What is that?"

He saw a man striding up the path. His cloak was torn apart, his armor soiled with blood, and his hail and skin were scorched by fire. Yet he walked as if the fite itself propelled him forward. A rush and roar sounded in the distance, and a woman stepped onto the path behind him. From her hands, a ball of fire bloomed and exploded down the walkway, chasing the man hungrily.

Elsis watched, his mourh agape, as the flames closed in, and still the man walked fotward. He didn't even glance over his shoulder, though the heat must have been unbeatable.

Just before the flames reached him, the woman made a gesture with her hands, pulling her palms apart and spreading her arms wide.

The fireball split. Each half streaked aside the man and past him, exploding in Elsis's face, driving the guard back into the doors and through. The front of the house collapsed, folding in on itself as the sttucture absorbed the brunt of the explosion. The rubble buried those of Balram's guards not consumed by the fireball.

Kail mounted the steps and crossed the shattered threshold of his home. He saw Balram come out from behind one of the pillars, bloodied and flush from the fire.

Kali noted the bites and scratches. "I see you've met my wife," he said.

Balram did not speak. His gaze flicked to Dantane and Meisha as they flanked Kali in the doorway.

"Welcome home, Kali," said a voice from the doorway. "Now step forward."

Kali smiled. "Am I to be forever finding you just over my shoulder, Aazen?" he asked.

Aazen stepped around them, kicking aside glass and debris to make a path. He half-led, half-dragged Varan in the crook of one arm. In the othet, he held a long dagger at the wizard's throat.

Meisha stiffened, but Kali motioned her and Dantane to step forward ahead of him. He kept his back to them and his eyes on Aazen as they moved fully into the hall. "You're a hard man to find, Balram," Kali remarked as Aazen circled around to join his father. "And I've been looking for you a long time."

"I'm flattered. But you shouldn't have come back," said Balram. "Now all this will end in much the same way it began. Except this time"-he touched Aazen's shoulder, and the look of paternal pride in his eyes sickened Kail-"my son will kill you.

Aazen lowered the wizard to the floor and handed his father the dagger. Balram took the blade and settled it back against the wizard's throat. Aazen drew his sword.

Meisha took a step forward, but Balram pivoted so she could see the folds of Varan's skin lying atop the steel. "Move again, and my hand will slip," he promised.

Dantane drew her back. They stepped aside as Kail and Aazen approached one another. To the surprise

of all, it was Kail who moved in first, banging his blade off Aazen's with a loud ringing.

"You're not hesitating, Kail," Aazen said, swinging through the parry. "Won't you try to convince me to stand down, to help you kill my father?"

Kail blocked a low thrust. "I told you I would never use you to get at Balram. I asked you to turn from the Shadow Thieves. You'll never be able to trust them."

Aazen drew his blade back, following up with a snapping kick aimed at Kail's midsection. Kail dodged, but caught the brunt of the kick against his bound arm. The pain teased stars from the corners of his eyes.

"I trusted you," Aazen said. "No matter what mischief you convinced me to take part in, you always looked out for me. In your house, I was safe."

"But you trust your father more, because no matter how twisted his love, you believe blood will never betray you," Kail replied.

"Yes." Aazen blocked a flurry of short attacks and reeled when Kali surrendered his advantage to strike with his fist. The punch glanced across Aazen's throat. He folded into a defensive crouch, but Kail followed, forcing him to move back and block while he choked for breath.

"But it's you, Aazen, who loves him beyond reason. He's buried you so deep in his control you don't know the way out. I thought I could convince you to come

with me, but I lost you that night in the cemetery, didn't I? I didn't even realize."

"Shut up," Aazen said, whipping his sword around and biting Kail's arm again. The pain was brilliant, but it was still nothing compared to being burned by a demon. Kail stepped into the move, allowing Aazen to deepen the wound. In doing so, Kali put himself right in Aazen's space. Aazen pressed the attack, oblivious. He believed Kali would weaken, favor his arm, and retreat.

Kali batted Aazen's blade aside, flipped his own blade to his off-hand, and grabbed Aazen by the throat, lifting him bodily from the floor. Blood streamed down Kail's arm, but he held on, pressing his fingers in under Aazen's jawbone until his sword fell from his hand.

"Aazen!" Balram cried, and for the first time there was real fear in his voice.

"Kail, stop!" yelled Meisha, who saw what he intended.

Kali ignored them both and released Aazen. His friend dropped, falling onto Kail's angled blade. Aazen grabbed Kail's shoulders to keep himself upright. Kail held him steady. He leaned forward and spoke against his friend's ear, but he meant the words for Balram.

"He was always faster, more graceful, when I was all limbs and bone. Laerin taught me better. A half-elf taught me how to beat him." He slid the blade from Aazen's stomach. "A dwarf taught me how to live."

He stood up, but Balram's eyes were fixed, horrified, on his son. "Aazen," he whispered. The knife went slack in his hand.

Kail reacted, closing the space between him and Balram with speed that would indeed have made the half-elf proud. Kail's sword, wet with the son's blood, found the father's heart with no fight at all from Balram. Kali drove him back and off the ground, drawing the knife away from Varan's throat.

Balram's body hit the ground in a pool of the spilled oil. The latent flames from Meisha's fireball touched the puddle and ignited, and Balram joined the fite that slowly consumed the wood skeleton of Motel house.

Kail backed away, making no move to put out the flames. He took Aazen's aims and slung his friend's body across his shoulders. Dantane lifted Varan, and Meisha took Varan's other side as they headed for the doors.

"This way," said Meisha. She waved an arm and the flames covering the door folded aside, boiling in orange swirls. The group slipped out through the small opening into the outer yard.

"Dantane," said Kail, laying Aazen down on the grass.

Glassy-eyed, Aazen watched in resigned silence as his lifeblood soaked the green lawn. The scene reminded Kail of that day on the Esmel shore, when Haig had saved Aazen's life. Those boys were long dead, Kali rhought. "Hurry," he said.

Meisha took Varan, and Dantane handed Kail his last vial. "You should have killed him," the wizard said impassively.

"Garavin would have been disappointed if I had." Propping Aazen against his shoulder, Kail poured the healing potion down his friend's throat. Aazen choked on the concoction, but Kail held his mouth. "Swallow, damn you. You're not gone yet.

Aazen swallowed. Selune's light reflected in his eyes as he stared upward. Gradually, they cleated and swiveled around to focus on Kail. "I thought you had done it," Aazen said hoarsely. "I thought you'd killed me."

"I would have been returning the favor," Kail pointed out. "You tried to kill me."

"I had to," said Aazen, sitting unsteadily. He stared over Kail's shoulder, through the gap in the front of the house. His father was in there. He would never come out again. It took a moment for the gravity of that truth to sink into Aazen's soul.

He looked back at Kali. "If I didn't make you fight in earnest, you couldn't have won," Aazen said. "I would have killed you before you got to him." He paused, remembering. "But I never thought you would use me that way. I didn't think my father could be so distracted."

"He loved you," Kail said, "as much as he was capable. You were right about that."

Meisha looked at Aazen incredulously. "You wanted Kali to win," she accused him. "You wanted him to-"

"Kill me," Aazen said. "Yes."

"Gods, why? If release was what you wanted, why didn't you kill Balram yourself?" she demanded.

"He couldn't," said Kali. He wiped his blade on the grass and resheathed it. "No more than I could accept that my father murdered Haig by his own will and took my mother from me. He was right. We were both in a cage. He wanted me to win."

"When did you figure that out?" asked Aazen.

"After we fought in the Delve," Kali said, "I suspected. I knew it later, when the portals wete unguatded. I should have known long before."

"Why didn't you kill me?"

"Because you wanted to be free of Balram. Your death wasn't necessary."

"Free," said Dantane, looking at Meisha. "To face justice?" Aazen shook his head. "To retutn to the Shadow Thieves." "No," Kail and Meisha said, almost as one. Dantane smiled.

"You will still answet for the refugees in the Delve," said Meisha, "for Varan."

"And for you," Aazen said, looking at her. "I did try to kill you. I thought I had succeeded. But now you of all people should want me to go ftee."

Meisha laughed scornfully. "The excuse would have to be profound," she said.

"Balram is dead. The Shadow Thieves' work in the Delve has been compromised, but Varan is alive, and they will not give him up easily," said Aazen. "If I return, I can report his death, and you will be free. Keep me for your Harper friends and there will be no safe place for you and the mad wizaid."

"The Harpers are more than capable of protecting their own," Meisha said, "and no bond of friendship holds me. I need nothing from you."

Aazen smirked. "And will the Harpers welcome a mad, dangerous wizard into their fold?" he asked. "You know there's only one place for him now, and if I don't go back, he'll never be able to get there. It's your choice."

Kail imagined Meisha's inner struggle. He fought his own feelings on the matter, but he wasn't surprised when Meisha finally nodded. "I accept," she said reluctantly, and added, "on the promise that if anything happens to Varan-if he is attacked, kidnapped, or suffers a mysterious 'accident' in his bed at night, the Harpers will come after you." A red glow suffused her skin, or perhaps it was just the reflection from the burning house. "And I will be leading the way."

Aazen nodded. "You, on the other hand," he said to Kali, "will be much harder to convince."

But Kail shook his head. "Go your own path," he said. "I won't hinder you, but choose any way but the Shadow Thieves. I spoke the truth. You'll never be able to trust them."

"I know," said Aazen. "And so they will never have a hold on me. I claim no love… or friendship," he said pointedly, "and so no one will ever control me-ever again!'

The conviction in his voice, the look in his eyes struck Kali with sadness. "True love doesn't control," he said.

"Of course it does," said Aazen. "Love and friendship are flawed emotions. They can be twisted, manipulated, as we've both experienced. Never again," he said. Then he added softly, "You've found better companions, Kali. Keep them."

When Aazen walked away, Kali did not cry out for him to return. For a second time, he watched the darkness swallow his friend, but this time Kail was not alone. Meisha and Dantane stood on either side of him, and later, Morgan, Talal, and Garavin joined them. They stood, silhouetted in the light of the fire, until the Gem Guard came.

CHAPTER 30

Keczulla, Amn 8 Marpenoth, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

The following days saw widespread rumors. Whispers said the fire that consumed the estate had killed Motel's heir and an undisclosed number of assassins. A surprising public statement from the Bladesmile family pattly fueled the rumors, reporting that all Morel assets were now in the care of Rays Bladesmile, per Kail Morel's request. The furor arising from the announcement, combined with Kail's disappearance from the city, led to rampant speculation about the fate of the Morel line. Many believed it to be extinct at last.

Kail was content to let the speculation drift where it may. Garavin rode beside him as they left the city behind. "Has there been any word since that night?" he asked. "No," Kail replied. "But I'll find her." "And ye're sure she's alive?"

Kali gripped the gem from Garavin's axe in his gloved palm. "I'm sure."

They rode in silence for a while. Kail glanced down at the dwarf. "I like your new ornament," he said, pointing to a gray streak running through the center of Garavin's beard. "Distinguishes you-channeling a god, and all that. Lucky for me, it hasn't made you insufferably self-righteous."

Garavin laughed. "If ye mean because I haven't argued against Meisha's plan, ye're wrong. I think

Dugmaren would approve, even if Dumathoin does not."

"Oh? Why so?"

"Because as much as Shanatai needs protecting, there's anothet school of thought says it needs to be explored, its magic understood. Otherwise it gets misused, as the Howlings misused it-as the Amnians suffered from what they didn't understand."

"Some would argue-myself included-that a mad wizard is the last person to take on such a task. Truth, old friend- should he really be allowed back in the Delve?"

"Yes," Garavin said without hesitation. "He's been touched by a god and a demon, and still he's trying to find his way back. That's what the lass believes. As long as there's hope, she can't give up on him, just as ye couldn't give up on yer father or Aazen."

"I left Aazen to the Shadow Thieves," Kali said. "What good can that possibly do his future?"

"Nothing," Garavin said, unwilling to lie to his friend. "But ye set his mind and heart free from his father, something he couldn't do for himself. He'll find his way on his own. Whether ye approve of his path or not, ye can't change him. Ye've yer own course to follow now."

"And you're coming with me?" Kali asked, trying to make it sound casual.

Garavin wasn't fooled. "Aye, lad, I'm coming, if only to see ye don't get trampled on by that wizard and

the Harper firebrand."

"I'm hoping Morgan and the boy will mitigate some of that," Kail said, though he privately wondered if he weren't setting himself up for a world of hurt when he finally did track down Cesira, with a fire-loving Harper, a thief, an orphan, and a rogue wizard in tow. He suspected Dantane's motives for joining the group had everything to do with Meisha's desire to take a leave from the Harpers and come along, and not any real concern for Cesira.

He looked up at the sky, but there were no birds today. The clouds threatened rain. They would be soaked by the time they got on the road, but Kali didn't care. His path, now that he'd found it, spanned Amn, the Sword Coast, to the frozen North if necessary. Whichever road led him to Cesira, he would follow it gladly.

"Where are we meeting Meisha?" Garavin asked. "Outside the Delve," replied Kail. "After she takes Varan home."

Meisha guided her master back to his pallet in the small workroom. With a word, she lit newly placed torches along the walls, flooding the room with watmth.

Varan did not seem to notice. He sat right down and reached into the wall, pulling out fresh tools and components as if from nowhere.

Meisha suppressed a shudder at how comfortably he fell into his old routine. Now that she knew just what his hands touched -what ancient power-was she doing the right thing?

"I'll be back to look in on you," she said, hoping some part -of him heard her. "Between visits, someone else will come to take care of you. You won't be alone."

Varan made no reaction, so she turned to go.

"Fixed."

"What?" Meisha asked, turning back to him.

Varan held up an object: a small, square disk that seemed to be made of fluid metal. "Fixed now, firebird," he said confidently. "I'll fix them all."

"Eventually," Meisha said. She smiled a little as Varan's face blurred in her vision. "Fix them all, Master Maybe when you do, you'll find your way back to me."

Talal waited for her in the hall. Meisha's anxiety, deep as it was, couldn't hold undet the boy's shy grin. "Ready?" she asked.

"More than," he said. His eyes fell on the pouch in her hand. She'd removed it from Varans neck. "He let you take that?"

"The demon's eye has been destroyed," Meisha explained. "The jarilith-and in tutn Varan-only ever guarded it because it setved as the link to Varan and to this plane. That's why he killed Shirva Tarlarin and attacked me-to protect the link."

"What will you do with it?"

"Give it to Dantane. He needs payment for his contract in Keczulla, and he wasn't able to salvage any magic items from the Delve. I offered this, and whatever's inside." But she'd temoved the apprentices' rings. They now rode on a chain around her neck.

Talal looked disappointed, but he didn't say anything. "You don't like him," Meisha guessed. "Dantane." "I don't trust him," Talal countered. "Neither does Kail," he added.

"Kail trusts him. He just doesn't like him," said Meisha, smiling.

"Why not?"

Meisha shrugged. "Maybe because Dantane was able to relieve Kail's father from his enslavemenr-if only for a little while. It was something Kail couldn't do. I think it chafes him a bit, though he'd nevet admit it." She glanced sidelong at him. "I still don't know why you're coming with us," she commented.

The boy shrugged. "Nothing bettet to do," he said.

Meisha raised an eyebrow. "There will be more battles," she said.

"How do you know?"

"There always are," she said dryly. "And more magic, more fire. I know you're afraid of it."

Talal nodded. They walked on in silence, and were almost to the tunnel entrance when he said, "But I'm not afraid of you."

"Oh." Meisha felt the warmth grow inside her, a heat that didn't bum. The feeling was so alien she didn't quite know what to make of it.

Was this what she wanted, an existence somewhere between fire and cold, between anger and love? And if so, how could she ever hope to maintain such a delicate balance? Varan hadn't been able to teach her that skill. Maybe Talal and the others could.

They stepped into the sunlight, where Kail and his party waited.

EPILOGUE

Keczulla, Amn 10 Marpenoth, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

Aazen wasn't surprised to see Daen waiting for him at the Contrail estate. Daen stood in the library behind his father's desk, pouring two glasses of wine.

"I've been awaiting your report," Daen said, regarding the hole in Aazen's tunic curiously. "I assume you encountered some trouble?"

Aazen reached for one of the glasses. "My father is dead," he replied. "The operation can no longer continue."

"I suspected as much." Daen didn't seem the least moved to hear of Balram's demise. "But we'll go on."

"You're not upset," said Aazen, draining his glass.

"Not at all. The profits from Balram's venture were exceptional, and the planning and intelligence behind the initial scheme equally so. True, his loss is a blow, but you are alive, and not the traitor he believed you to be. I teceived great things from Balram. I expect no less from his son." He saluted Aazen and dtank. "In fact, I believe you'll come to mean a great deal to our organization in the future. That is, assuming you still wish to walk with us?" He smiled faintly at Aazen. "Or should I be upset about something?" he asked.

Aazen set the glass back on the desk with a soft clink. "You should perhaps be concerned that I've poisoned yout drink," he said bluntly.

Daen didn't immediately react, until Aazen held up his open palm. Wired to his middle finger was a small vial, no larger than a thimble. Daen opened his mouth, but Aazen went on, "To answer your question, yes, I still desire a place among the Shadow Thieves-your place, specifically."

Daen grunted. "You're bluffing. Do you truly believe we don't have ways of dealing with poison?"

Aazen shtugged. "In that case, we'lltalk tomorrow, when the time for an antidote has passed."

"Wait." Daen's btavado slipped a fraction when Aazen turned to the door, but he tried to appear more interested than upset. "What do you want?"

"To know more about my 'family,' " Aazen said. "I want to know how far your web reaches and who controls my fate."

"None of us know that," said Daen. When Aazen started to turn away, he chuckled. "Kill me if you like, but it's the truth, and the not knowing serves us all well. You're clever, but you're still a babe, Aazen. You need my guidance." Daen had returned to patronizing, the master to the student. "I can help you."

"Can you?" asked Aazen. "Because I tire of having my fate dictated by others. I told Kail the Shadow Thieves would not control me, and I will keep that promise."

"What is it you want, then, to rule us all?" scoffed Daen.

But Aazen was perfectly serious. "Yes. And you will help me, Daen, or you will die painfully tomorrow. Which will it be?"

"Oh, you're a dead little fool," said Daen serenely, but he nodded. "I'll help you, as long as it serves me to do so. For now, I have no choice, if I want to stay alive. But if I get the chance to kill you-"

"Agreed," said Aazen. "We'll take things one day at a time. As long as you impress me, Daen, I promise you'll stay alive." Daen's jaw tightened-the fitst visible sign of anger Aazen had ever seen from the man. "Where shall we begin?" Daen asked.

"The lowest point in the web," Aazen said. "Every Shadow Thief under your command. We'll work from there." Were he to lead them someday, he would need to know every member of his new family. He was looking forward to meeting all of them.

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